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A YELLOW ASTER



A YELLOW ASTER

BY

I O T A

“And if this fought-for climax is ever reached
“and science, creeping along the path of experiment,
“so invades the realm of Nature that a blue chrys-
“anthemum or A Yellow Aster can be produced at
“will, the question still remains, has Nature been
“made more beautiful thereby?”

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C O N T E N T S

	PAGE
CHAPTER XXXI.	I
„ XXXII.	11
„ XXXIII.	29
„ XXXIV.	45
„ XXXV.	66
„ XXXVI.	84
„ XXXVII.	107
„ XXXVIII.	124
„ XXXIX.	140
„ XL.	152
„ XLI.	160
„ XLII.	171
„ XLIII.	185
„ XLIV.	192



A YELLOW ASTER.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GWEN lost no time in conducting her projected series of experiments, she carried them on conscientiously, and with an assumption of spontaneity that gave her husband a high opinion of her powers of self-government. As for the results on Gwen herself, she found them nil, she failed in experiencing one thrill, or the ghost of a tremor.

She had an opportunity about this time of judging of the effects on the situation of a sudden danger to her husband. They had driven into the station to meet a parcel of books from London. They were early, and employed their time in watching the goings-on of an imp in human form wrestling with its nurse at one end of the platform.

“What an inestimable blessing it would be,” said Humphrey reflectively, “if the Lord would be pleased to remove that creature. Look at it, biting and screaming like a horse!”

“Mr. Drew says the child is half idiotic.”

“If it’s not, the nurse soon will be—Phew—take the reins!”

She only knew she had them in a bundle in her hands, and Humphrey was

off, then there struck on her ear a crash of sound, and through it one thin high shriek and a long wailing.

For a second her eyes floated in darkness, then the express thundered on and she could see a confused mass of men and women bending down over something.

“That distinct definite shriek was awful!” Gwen found herself thinking, with curious composure, though she knew perfectly well that her husband had very likely lost his life to save that of a congenital idiot.

He was only stunned, however, and the infant had got off scot-free.

When he came to her, Gwen was very white in sheer disgust at her own want of emotion, and Strange knew as distinctly as if she had told him the cause of her pallor.

He would not wait for the books, but turned the horses' heads homewards and set off at a smart trot.

"That amiable infant," he said, when they had cleared the village, "it seems, felt itself moved to commit suicide in order to spite its nurse; it has been a long-standing threat, the woman says. It threw itself on its stomach before the in-coming train. By Jove! It was a close shave, we only got off by the skin of our teeth!"

She would have liked to touch him, to let her eyes melt in his sight, to make her lips tremble, but she could not for the life of her. She knew he had acted like a hero, but as she had known before, he couldn't do any other thing when the call came; it did not seem in any way to alter matters.

Then she began to speculate as to what would have happened if perchance he had *not* come off by the skin of his teeth. She looked curiously at him and wondered.

"I haven't a notion," she concluded at last, and she was silent for a long time and very pale.

"Was the game worth the candle?" she asked, as they went through the terrace gates. "You had said a minute before, the Lord would do well to remove the child."

"Probably not, but when a man happens to be in a desperate hurry he can't stop to go all round a question. I must go to the stables myself, there is something wrong with Boccaccio's off hoof. Shall I help you up the steps—you look white?"

“No, thank you—I wish—I wish—” she said slowly; she never finished her sentence, but went wearily into the house without turning her head.

“I wish to Heaven I knew what he thinks of it all—how much he minds!” she whispered to herself, with noiseless passion, as soon as she got into her room.

“Even in this dead-level life a big thing has come and gone, and has left me precisely as it found me.”

She smote her hands together sharply, then she rang for her maid; she dared not be alone, her control over herself was on its last legs.

If she had looked into Strange’s den half an hour later she might have got some idea of how much he minded, but he ate a good dinner and afterwards tied

flies with a steady hand, and made several quite decent jokes as he watched her standing at the open window, looking with careless interest at his work.

She wore a Watteau gown of pale primrose, with purple pansies scattered here and there over it; she held a great yellow fan in her hand and stood bathed in the yellow twilight.

“If I boxed her ears,” he thought, “I wonder what she would do or say? Any way it couldn’t hurt her more than those devilish experiments of hers hurt me. I have a good mind to try—if her ears weren’t altogether so perfect I swear I would. Ah, my good girl, you are playing with fire!”

He paused to fix a wren’s tail feather in its place.

“There may come a time, little fool, when I may get tired of this game and resort to active measures, and then you’ll find your bit of hell,

“ ‘Dann willst du weine, du liebe kleine!’ ”

In a moment of abstraction he sang it aloud, and gave Gwen a considerable start.

“Do you ever sew, Gwen?”

“No, but I can, I believe, in a fashion.”

“I wish you would then, it might make you look a bit human.”

“Good gracious! I am not divine again, am I? I thought I had shut all that away with my white tea-gown. Perhaps you would like to call ‘Tolly?’ ”

“Oh, dear, no! You would not conduce to his soul’s salvation in the least. On

the contrary, I was thinking you had a marked resemblance to Lilith."

"Oh, Lilith! I am flattered certainly. I think I will go and get some work."

Strange laughed, and went on tying feathers on hooks.

"Ha, that touched her up!" he muttered.

When she was half up the stairs she stopped and stamped:

"How dare he say—say with a laugh what I won't even dare to think!"

However, she was soon back again in her yellow twilight, but sitting this time, and with a big bundle of coarse flannel in her hand that she began to stitch with demure diligence.

"What in the name of fortune is that!" said Strange, after taking steady stock of it.

“I don’t really know, I got it in Eliza’s room—I think it is a jelly-bag, its just like one I once made for Mrs. Fellowes, and spoiled disgracefully. I sewed up the wrong end!”

Strange investigated it with much interest.

“My good girl,” he said at last, “do you know what you are doing? You are sewing an old woman’s petticoat.”

He gave a laugh that reached Tolly, as he sat varnishing boots downstairs.

“Bless ’em, the pair of ’em,” he remarked, “and as ’appy together as if they lived in four rooms! Queer, too! as the aristocracy’s mostly gone to the dogs in the domestic line!”

CHAPTER XXXII.

“I WONDER whether the fellow is grasping the ‘high seriousness’ of Art, or going to the devil!”

Strange was on his road to see Brydon, from whom that morning he had received a rather enigmatical note.

“I didn’t expect you this hour,” said Brydon, when he arrived, “I thought it was that brute, the fellow over me, who always forgets his key. I came back to

the old place, you see, from a sort of habit, and I thought too it would suit Mag and Con. I went to see them. They taught me a lot, those two girls; they had fine flesh tints, better than the French article as a rule."

"Have they been to see you?"

"Yes, Mag's married, and her figure!—throw your coat there—It's a sin to see it; women of that order should die young."

"And Connie?"

"Connie! she's grown frowsy, I'm afraid it's gin! There was a blackguard she 'walked with' who levanted with a cook, so it's censorious to grudge her a drop of comfort. But to think of those pearly tints grown frowsy!" he murmured, "to sell that colouring for a greasy mess of pottage! The folly of man is inscrutable!—

Strange, you want desert air, your skin has lost tone!"

"Season, my good boy, what else can you expect?"

"I wonder if it's all season," thought the fellow, and an unaccountable coldness ran down his spine. "I wonder if he's made a mistake too!"

"How are you getting on, as to work?"

"I have to speak of something else first, and for reasons best known to myself, I prefer fresh air for it—will you stroll round?"

"I should like to see the picture first," said Strange.

One of his old blushes mounted to Brydon's cheeks.

"Wait till afterwards, if you don't mind," he said.

“Look at the light from that gin-palace on the red head of that child!” he went on, as they turned the corner, “it’s funny what glorious effects one gets from the filthiest combinations! There is no light more bewildering and lovely than the phosphoric blue flicker from a grave-yard.

“That effect now, those reeking gin lights on that beastly dirty head, and the corpse lights are like a lot of writers’ work, no one can pass it by, it has a power to grasp and hold you, that cleaner things don’t have, and such power means genius, don’t you think? Power strong enough, I mean, to stoop a fellow’s mind and nose low enough to batten on corruption? If the corruption wasn’t made worth examining, one would only pass on, with a kick at the seething mass. Instead of

that, one looks and spits, and looks and spits again, but keeps looking and finally settles down to enjoy oneself and then a fellow gets enervated and unmanned before he knows what he is about. He sees the pitiless truth of things, of course, but he loses everything else—the result is very limiting when one thinks of it. Battening on certain books,” went on Brydon after a pause, “was the beginning of it, I think, then rottenness smells sweet after a time, and a fellow gets curious and wants to exploit on his own account. I did all sorts of things first, I tried trees, sun, shade, moonlight; I walked blisters on my feet, I worked in the sweat of my brow, but nothing would still the brutal throbbing, and I went mad one day in that maddening city. Art

wasn't worth a straw to save me. I made a beast of myself, the cheap sort of beast that I had funds for, and—here is the result!”

“Well, you're a sorry object, it must be confessed!”

“But that's not the worst either—do you know I have altogether lost the way to work; I can do nothing. Now some fellows can go down in the gutter one day and mount up amongst the gods the next without turning a hair; it beats me.”

“It's a good deal a question of nationality,” said Strange, “Englishmen as a rule can't do complete work while they're mud-larking; French fellows often can; just as no decent bourgeois John Bull has it in him to write tons of magnificent

filth on a sort of principle. The fact is, no fellow of your temperament has any business to wallow in modern French realism, you haven't tone enough. I felt certain this would happen, but you had to take your chance with your betters, and no doubt the experience hasn't been all loss. I am sorry for you all the same; you'll find your repentance a darned sight bitterer than the delirium was sweet. That is my experience anyway, and it will go harder with you; your health, you see, can't stand it."

"It can't, which makes me the bigger fool. To think of my work being knocked on the head, and to so little purpose! Especially," he added naively, "when one has to do that sort of thing on the cheap."

"Fellows like you feel that sort of

thing always, even if they have a pocket full of coin. You see, you are too fastidious and sensitive to enjoy vice properly; and yet the queer thing is, it debases you sooner than it does men of coarser make, unless it kills you right off the reel, as it mostly does. Stronger men have things to keep them up, you fellows haven't; they get brutalized if you like, but it is the brutalization of men, not of women."

Here Brydon winced, possibly Strange saw him—he took no notice, however, but went on coolly:

"They don't get rotten-soft, and corrupt. Another thing that's against you; your father's a parson, and his father before him, and your mother is a parson's daughter."

"Yes—what on earth has that to do with it?"

"A lot. With inherited conscience and spiritual feelings, and a sneaking regard for hell fire in every drop of your blood, things were sure to be made pretty hot for you in next to no time. Small wonder your work went to the devil!"

"I suppose it's all the brutal truth," said Brydon.

"Did you expect this?" he asked with sudden shyness. "Are you disappointed?"

"I am too old ever to be disappointed in any fellow, probably there's not a thing you have done I wouldn't myself have done had I been in your skin. Now the question is, what's to fit you for work again?"

“I think,” said the boy dolefully, “the best thing I could do would be to cut my throat.”

“If I felt like an ass I should hold my tongue about it, and take a blue pill. By the way, there’s some contradiction, for Blunt saw Legrun the other day, and he’s tremendously pleased with you.”

“Oh, I took to swatting for a time, as a sop to Cerberus, and worked like the very devil at drawing, but somehow I’d rather get a kick any day, than praise, when I know my work’s dishonest, done to cover filth; it’s an insult to Art.”

“My good boy, don’t be morbid! It was a good sight better to bring your lines into order than to do nothing.”

“All the same, I have no satisfaction in any work done then.”

“Ah, parson’s blood again—no need you should, but you needn’t add it to the list of your sins, that would be rather a work of supererogation, wouldn’t it?”

“I would like to go out into the desert alone for forty days or so, and wrestle with anything that came along, God or the devil.”

“A very proper attitude of mind and befitting your breed. In the meantime, when do you intend returning to Paris?”

“I must go to-morrow.”

“Why must you?”

“Because——” he hesitated, blushing furiously.

“Good Heavens, man, speak out! Have we been friends for fifteen years for nothing?”

“Well, beastliness, however cheap you

do it, is costly. Even your magnificent commission has gone down the gutter."

"It wouldn't pay either of us for you to return there just now, besides, I want you to come over and stay at my house."

"I cannot stay in the house with Lady Strange," said Brydon in a low voice, "I couldn't. If I am not clean enough to work at my Art I am certainly not fit to eat and drink in her presence. I didn't stay in my father's house until my mother and sisters had gone away, and—Lady Strange, somehow, is divine to me. She is always the bride in that picture. I think," he continued, with a strange softness in his voice, "for all her jeering at me, that I have painted the real woman."

It was Strange's turn to wince this time.

"Look here, Strange," the boy went on, still softly and with lowered head, "I finished that picture before I went into the sty. I wouldn't have touched her with a dirty brush."

"My dear fellow, I know it! I should have liked you to have stayed with us. At any rate you will stay in London for a few days; I will be your banker, of course; it will be, after all, only a very trifling increase of your debt to me, and there's plenty of time to pay that in."

He took hold of the fellow's arm and swung him round.

"It's getting late," he said, "and I want to see the picture to-night."

They walked on in silence, the boy's chivalrous adoration of his wife touched Strange sharply. All the same, he felt vastly inclined to turn round and punch his head for it.

"How dared the fellow go speculating on her possibilities!" he thought; "that is my business.

"Yet when one comes to think of it, I'm an ass, I might just as well go for the dozens of others whose admiration is quite as vicarious. It's not Gwen one of the lot goes mad over, it's her double. Heigh ho! Bigamy's an awful embarrassment."

"I tried to keep exactly to Nature in that last picture of Lady Strange," said Brydon, as he set to unfastening the packing of his picture.

"You succeeded," said Strange. Brydon looked round.

"You didn't like it then—no more did I, I tried too hard to be faithful to the order."

"Well, and so you were, and that was what was wanted of you. Mrs. Waring, for whom the portrait was intended, liked it tremendously," said Strange shortly. "Damn the fellow's impudence!" he thought.

Brydon continued his cutting and unwinding, painfully red in the face.

When it was all undone he waited for a moment before he removed the last covering, then he pulled it off with a quick soft movement, and from a vague feeling of half shy delicacy he turned aside and began to cut up tobacco diligently.

When Strange saw his wife, not the cold living abstraction, but a warm, big-hearted, divinely-natural creature, alive there on the canvas before him, a sudden soft gush of tears flooded his eyes, and he shook and reeled at the queer warm shock of them.

“Brydon,” he said, turning round suddenly, “one makes a fool of oneself over her, it is a tribute to your genius.”

Brydon looked at him and hesitated, then he said in a half-fearful tone, looking away,

“It is no tribute to my genius, it is that face! I never cried, I have roared and howled, you know, scores of times, but I never cried properly till I saw it; it is the strongest and the most touching woman’s face I ever saw.”

"It is, and you have done infinite justice to it."

"I had to paint her as she was there, I couldn't help myself, I shall never again do anything like it."

"What does Legrun say of it?"

He was silent for a minute.

"Did you think," he asked at last, angrily, "that I did that for Legrun's praise or blame? Did I paint *her* to be torn limb from limb by those old steely eyes?"

"As a matter of fact I did not expect anything half so sensible from you, but this—this," he added slowly, with a spasm of infinite generosity, "this shall hang in the Academy."

"If it does," said the boy, "I shall never touch a brush again."

"Well, we won't discuss it now."

"Nor at any other time. I shouldn't care a tuppenny damn, don't you know, for any fame for which you had to suffer."

"There was no word of suffering to me, or to anyone else."

"Who said there was? But do you see the alterations I made," he went on hurriedly, "I made you even vaguer than you were and served the parson in the same way, and that carpet in Waring church was too strong altogether, I got a piece of stem green stuff and substituted it."

"Well, it is a work of genius," said Strange as he got into his coat.

"I am not such a fool as to deny that, but *I* didn't paint it, you know. Here, you'll break your neck on these stairs, let me light you. Good night, dear old man."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHEN Mrs. Waring got the sketches of her children—for Strange had used almost physical force to compel Dacre to run over to Paris to sit to Brydon—the very first minute she found herself alone with them she cried her heart out over the two, then she sat herself down and systematically adored them.

She had them hung in the library where she could see them from her

writing-table and only for their weight she would have had them carried to her room every night.

Mr. Waring, in his emotionless way, valued his daughter's gift, but this chronic passion of adoration was beyond him. He had already borne much with divine patience; he had seen his wife carried away from his side for hours at a stretch, to waste her mind and soul in the duties of an ordinary squire's wife, and she had come back to babble of babies in a way that made his blood run cold. He had caught her thoughts wandering at moments when the crisis of a discovery was setting in, and with tears in her eyes that the subject under discussion could in no wise account for. Ah, he had suffered in a thousand indefinable ways!

But yet there were moments when he had her still, just as in the sweet old times, body and soul and brain, all to himself; when she still put out all the force of her keen fine intellect and saw, with her beautiful intuition, puzzles that had made his great man's brain reel.

Through all time had ever any man such a wife, he would think, as he watched her softly frowning, pondering over a thought and bringing out the result with that charming diffidence, that wonderful veneration for the nice intricacies of truth that characterized her, looking withal so young, so soft, so serene.

No wonder that the man's heart clave unto her!

And now those pictures! That sublimely haughty young woman—that big

strong soldier with pluck of a most soulless British order stamped all over him, came in and robbed him of the better part of himself.

They still sat side by side, hand in hand, and worked together, but they were no longer one. No wonder indeed, that untimely age fell upon the man and forced him with its chill hand down on his stick, a little heavier as each day passed!

Mrs. Waring did not go out every day, her restless yearning often took her no farther than the children's old nursery, where she would sit by their little chests of drawers and finger their old yellowing baby clothes with a shy sad wistful wonderment; she had never put a stitch into one of them, and their shapes and

intricacies were sealed mysteries to her.

Mary, now grown aged and gray, looked upon the state of affairs with much dissatisfaction, and seemed likely to continue to do so, for things instead of getting better got worse. Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes did all they could to turn her gentle persistent grief into a more healthy channel and were by no means careful to spare her any plain speaking, but it seemed impossible to get her to fit her new sweet sad experience into her old life and to make a whole of it.

It is a frightful grind to get a great heartful of fresh emotions, of new sorrows and joys, into a middle-aged woman, and not to cause a general disruption. It seemed rather hard, however, that Mr. Waring should half perish in his wife's

own particular earthquake. But though his grief lay down with him at night and rose with him day by day, he cherished her with ever-increasing tenderness, and never by word or look expressed the smallest atom of reproach.

Towards the end of July a little fleecy cloud of hope, no bigger than a man's hand, appeared upon the horizon, and Mr. Waring grasped it with nervous despair.

After repeated puttings off, Gwen was coming for certain in a week or two, to remain until the shooting took them North.

"Perhaps now," the poor man thought, "perhaps now she will find what she wants, and can rest and be satisfied, and our life will return to us. This maternal feeling must certainly be a very powerful and a

very precious factor in a woman's making, or such an one as my wife would not be so touched and shaken by its advent and growth in her. It is a mystery, in truth, thus to come so late, born out of due season as it were, and so strongly to take possession of her. I certainly never should have classed her among the true mothers, the producing women; they should be of a more robust, a more animal type altogether. It is a most remarkable case, with curious complications. It is the daughter—the feminine part of her—my wife yearns and pants for, the masculine element seems to affect her but little; when our son Dacre visits us I have in vain looked for any symptoms of satisfaction or restfulness.

“I feel so unusually depressed and aged,

this afternoon," he went on, slowly, laying down his fruitless pen, and gazing with sad eyes out of the window, "even my ordinary lucidity of brain seems clouding and thickening. It cannot be that I have already reached the ultimatum, and that the period of decadence is now upon me—that cannot surely be! Only just forty-seven," he cried softly, and his face sank down in his hands on the study table.

He raised it again, and went over to his cabinet and touched his heaps of manuscript one by one with loving lingering tenderness, but a little shakily.

"This but just begun!" he murmured; "this but just wanting the verification of an experiment or two; these, notes for

a new work, the most comprehensive, the most exact we have yet made—ah! this book would have been very close up to the truth, nearer to it than anything yet produced.—She looked with such keen, such very youthful pleasure to the lighter task of compilation; that youthfulness in her intellectual pleasures is a very precious gift of my wife.

“Here is a little satirical skit she wrote in a playful moment, how charming it is, how delicate! Ah, my sweet young wife! More notes—more—and so few worked out to their final conclusion! Must I then take these symptoms as those of untimely decay,” he whispered sitting down again, “I, who looked to long years of honest labour in which I might have forged on farther

than my fellows, and have erected some fresh finger-posts on the road to everlasting truth? To stop now, when the world is crying and wailing in the darkness of its ignorance, when men grasp any scrap of verified knowledge as a drowning man a straw, and must I be swept down the hill before I have breasted the crest? Must I sink to oblivion with my work but just begun, and with the heat of battle strong upon me—and she—my wife, my own, my helpmeet—Do none of these things strike and touch her, does this overmastering strange tumult of new emotions shut her heart to the awful beauty of truth?

“It is strange,” he repeated, “strange, and very sad. The swift-running smooth course of life has been paralyzed for

me, I am oppressed with torturing doubts, and—and—I believe it is not age, it is not the years which have stunned my powers, I believe it is this new phase of her life; then comes the consideration: is this a passing phase, or is it permanent? I cannot face the question!" he cried with a groan, holding his head in both hands to steady it.

Then he took his hat and stick, and made mechanically for the Rectory.

She always came from that direction, and always sadder than when she went forth.

But to-day she was different. When she saw her husband she did not keep to her ordinary soft listless movements, and then when she reached him, slip her hand into his mechanically from mere

reflex action, and strike out eagerly into an infant anecdote.

She started and flushed, and ran towards him with outstretched hands, and looked wistfully up in his face, and her mouth trembled as, for the first time, the great change in the man flashed itself into her, and her heart stood still and her brain reeled.

“Henry!” she cried, “My Henry, you are tired!”

He stooped wonderingly closer to her. “Dearest, no!”

She gazed with sickening dread up into his face.

“Ah, yes, you are tired and sad. Mr. Fellowes has been telling me so much, making things clear, and—and—yes, you are older, and I never saw it until this instant.”

"My love, I am well!" he said, caressing her softly.

"It is I who have done this, Henry"—she silenced his protest with a soft imperious motion—"they saw it weeks ago; I am a bad wife now, as I have been a bad mother—ah, that is very sad!"

She laid her head down on their clasped hands and with a little shudder broke into soft sobbing.

"You are a most true, most noble wife," he whispered, "my helpmeet in all things!"

"I have gone away and neglected you, and you have grown older."

"Come home, my best beloved, come home and rest."

"If I only could," she said wistfully, "but dear, I am restless, I cannot stay still."

"After Gwen went away," she continued softly, with bent head, as they paced slowly up the drive, "my heart seemed to fill with restless growth, new thoughts and feelings were for ever astir in me, I could not rest; old feelings that should have had their budding and birth long ago only then awoke, and beset me with sweet pain."

She stopped and leaned up against him. "I have never been able to tell you all this before, except indirectly. Ah, Henry, such strange new thoughts torture and soothe me, they war with one another continually and there is not one drop of sweetness that has not two drops of bitterness to temper it withal.

"Let's walk on, dearest, you are cold.—I have such strange yearnings, Henry, for

baby touches and baby kisses, I, who have never felt them for my own, have to seek them among babies not of my flesh and blood. I have to find the pale ghosts of them amongst my lost children's little clothes."

"My love, not lost."

"Yes, Henry, lost, more than if the grave had closed over them; those forfeited things do not return. I have a mother's heart now when I no longer need it," she said, with a wan smile, "and I know --ah, I know so many things, such pitiful things. The other day a tiny baby grasped at my breast and tried to nestle his head there—to suck my breast, Henry—it was worse than death, for I knew I had lost the best sweetness of life."

"My love, my love, those things are not

lost," cried her husband, and then with sudden and surprising astuteness, he added, "there will be Gwen's children."

She clutched his hand in a sudden tremor of excitement.

"Ah, and then—*then*, too, Gwen might understand—now—" she coughed softly and broke off.

"But, Henry, I have you, we will go together as we used to do; perhaps work, regular work, may make me feel better."

"My love," he cried eagerly, "I am certain it is just the thing you want, the very thing."

"Perhaps," she said sadly, "perhaps it is."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ONE morning Strange came into his wife's boudoir with his whip in his hand, and a light overcoat on his arm.

"I am going out beyond Highgate," he said, "to see a pointer pup, it is a pretty drive, would you like to come?"

She had been thinking with a sort of dread of the hours that must run before the darkness came, and of the numbers of times she would be expected to smile, to

return brilliant answers to dull questions, and generally to keep up her superb deception.

She had a dozen engagements but she decided to go with him.

He drove a high mail phaeton that ran very lightly.

"That Highgate hill is a bad one," he said as they were starting, giving the brake a sharp tug, "I don't think this will cave in easily, however."

"Besides, Hengist and Horsa can be trusted anywhere," said Gwen, who knew nothing of ordinary nervousness.

"I wouldn't trust anything in horseflesh down a steep hill with the brake off. Look down that mesh of streets! Taking it in patches there isn't a more hideous, sordid, mean hole in the world than

this London, just look through that lane!"

Gwen gave a shrug of disgust.

"It's all frightful and gray and deadly dull, but that never strikes me as the worst part of life in these places. It is the hideous want of privacy that revolts me, and the awful nearness of one human creature to another, the sheer impossibility of thinking, or feeling, or looking, except under observation, the horrible indecent openness of life."

"What do you know about it?" he asked laughing.

"Oh, I have done slumming in my time, under Mrs. Meades' wing. I like new experiences, you know. We saw a great many frightful things while the craze lasted, but the worst of all was a cobbler's *ménage*. He had a wife and seven children,

and they lived in two rooms, he never went out, that man, neither did his wife; she squatted on the floor all day and cleaned things with a patent soap which smelt worse than they did, and he saw all she did and thought and felt; the awful hunted look of that women was a thing to dream of.

“While Mrs. Meades talked—‘religion’ she called it—the cobbler sewed leather, and glanced now and again at his wife in a way to make your blood freeze, and then he would hold up his awl in a ghastly fashion, and grin at her over it; it was no bit of steel he was gloating over, it was his wife’s soul held up on that awl.

“But putting husbands and wives out of the question,” she went on, “this appalling nearness of living is

most horrible. One must feel for ever on a dissecting table, having one's most hidden nerves pulled out one by one."

"They have no nerves, and they don't experiment on one another, those people; they don't live enough for that, they exist in a smoky thick atmosphere of indifference."

"That man did experiment, and his wife was not indifferent; she was nerves and nothing else."

"These were exceptions."

"The worst tragedies are made out of exceptions."

"Probably, exceptions are mostly unnatural."

"It is not unnatural to object to have one's sensations flayed alive!"

"Such sensitiveness is unnatural to a low under-fed semi-sentient state of life,

such people have enough to do to keep body and soul together, without considering them apart."

"But I contend they do consider them apart, they do make investigations."

"Yes, into the vices of their betters, which have a perennial interest for them as being beyond their reach. You won't catch them as a rule classifying one another and flaying souls. These are the distractions of the leisure classes."

"Then," said Gwen, "I wish I had been born in the other class."

"To what purpose?" said her husband, "you would have been an exception."

"Oh, then," she said impatiently, "I shall in future reserve all my pity for the exceptions, and retain my normal hardness of heart for the other crowd."

I never could get universal philanthropy to appeal to me, and it's comfortable to put one's want of humanity on a reasonable basis. But those generations of square pegs in round holes, they worry one! And yet people speak of a just God!"

"Poor God! What should we do without that universal scape-grace? As if He had anything to do with the matter! The fathers have trusted to chance, and the children suffer.

"But at any rate whether the fathers or God are the real scape-goats it's quite original nowadays to profess faith in justice, and to refrain from railing against the Almighty, so we'll let God and heredity have a rest; besides, we are losing the pauper scent and getting that of the country—did you catch that whiff? I am.

glad we are down this hill, the horses are unaccountable."

"Hengist actually looks like kicking," said Gwen.

"Bell, get off, will you, I believe there's a fly somewhere I can't spot."

"Sure enough, three on 'em, sir; and them horses is mortal thin-skinned since their clipping yesterday."

"What a duffer I was," said Strange to his wife, "not to look at them before we started, they are probably not half groomed and are tickling like the deuce, and I can't even have the satisfaction of swearing about it properly, as I was every bit as careless myself."

A quick little conviction shot into Gwen, that whatever God and the general ruck

of fathers might be, her husband was just enough.

This silenced her for two solid miles. When they got near the Inn, Strange suggested that they had better stay and lunch there.

"Oh, yes, it really doesn't matter," she said.

"I wonder what does, in her present mood!" thought Strange, as he helped her down.

As ill-luck would have it, a wretched faint feeling she had experienced once or twice before, came on her, and she reeled a little in her husband's hands.

He looked at her in the most utter astonishment, he hadn't fathomed her yet it seemed.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

She blushed suddenly.

"No, my foot got twisted in my shoe-lace."

"The girl is lying," he thought, with a most unpleasant shock.

He brought her into a small, clean, quaint old room, fragrant with mignonette, a bunch stood in a glass on the cottage piano and there was a long green box full of it on the window-sill.

"Now sit in here in the shade," he said, "and take off your hat, and rest."

He stood for a moment and watched her, then he arranged the pillows on the couch and made her lie down, with an involuntary protecting manner quite unlike his usual airs of equality and sexlessness.

That lie had made her all at once so

young to him, so infinitely pathetic.

He could have taken her in his arms like a little child, and hushed her to sleep.

When he had gone she clenched her hands in a rage.

“One can’t call one’s soul one’s own with such a man!” she muttered, “it’s bondage worse than death. Talk of that cobbler, he’s not the only man who holds his wife’s soul on an awl—oh, the horrible, horrible, horrible indecency of marriage without love! And this vile pretence of fair living!” she went on, sitting up and staring out of the window, “the jokes we have together, and the talks!”

She got up and went about the room examining the curiosities, the stuffed birds, and the shells, and the awful oleographs.

“What’s this?” she said, lifting the

glass from some glittering object, but she dropped it as if it stung her.

"Ah, why did I touch it? I am sick to death of everything."

She went over to the sofa and flung herself back among the cushions.

It was a great slab of frosted wedding-cake, kept over for the first christening.

"Oh, it's all a most frantic joke!" she said. "Here he comes, I must sit up and play to my audience, knowing all the time the audience sees into the marrow of my bones."

She was not perhaps quite sane, as saneness goes, all through their lunch, but she was strangely brilliant, her eyes flashed with a queer fluttering light, her lips were soft and mobile, and she ate her chicken

with a will, and only that her natural fineness of nature restrained her, she would have seized the big old cut-glass decanter of wine and have drained it at a gulp. But she kept the curb well on and never once flagged in her course, which surprised herself even more than it did her husband.

But when he went out to see the horses put in she had a little private collapse all to herself.

It was hotter than ever and the flies grew more troublesome, but it was all very fresh and green.

"I never knew this part was so pretty," she said as they were driving through a chestnut-bordered lane. Talking was an effort but it seemed a less exhaustive one than sitting there mute under her husband's reflections.

"It's pretty," he said absently, "and almost as little known as Central Africa; look at the indifferent calm estate of those cows, they might live in the desert for anything they know of the noise of life."

"Yes, and here we are in the thick of genteel barbarism," said Gwen, as they turned into the high road. "It is well for the cows that they live by sight, not by imagination; it's a horrid anomaly, the cows and the country, and not a hundred yards away 'Arry rampant."

"I believe I like the combinations, still life, and life in the struggle, and 'Arry everywhere, from cradle to grave, his cemetery not a stone-throw away."

"Your toleration is rather overpowering," remarked Gwen sardonically, "you speak in the same kindly good-humoured way

of 'Arry and of God, adopting the same heavy-fatherly style to both."

"I really beg their pardons, but as a matter of fact, I look on them both as much-maligned beings and as requiring the conscientious championship of all honest citizens. We judge the two, the Potter and His clay, by measuring them by our own standards. I think, for my own part, it's amazing impudence to sit at one's ease and damn 'Arry, as is the vogue now; nearly as much the vogue as sitting at ease and criticizing the Almighty. I must, however, leave God and man, and proceed to think chiefly of horses for the present. Look at those brutes of donkey carts!"

They were just going up the hill which

was abnormally crowded. The donkey carts were ubiquitous.

"I never saw them so thick before," said Strange, "why, I forgot, of course, it's a holiday! I wonder if it will be so crowded down the hill? Those tram lines are the deuce for hoofs."

They drove on silently between the rows of quaint old houses, till they got to the crest of the hill coming down towards Holloway.

"The horses seem steady enough now," said Gwen.

"Yes, they're all right—just as well too. Did you ever see such a crowd!—Phew!"

There was a rustle and a flying glimmer of white from a costermonger's cart coming slowly up the hill behind a jaded ass.

It was the *Echo* of the day before, caught by a sudden flickering breeze, and carried fantastically to and fro right under the horses' noses; they threw up their heads and sniffed angrily, but Strange had them well in hand and soothed their terror gently, and being no fools the brutes were just realizing the causelessness of their fright, when a demon got into the breeze, caught the paper in its clutches, and with a rushing swirl of leaves, dashed it into Hengist's two eyes right between the blinkers.

Blinded, tickled, irritated to madness, the horse lashed out wildly, plunged forward, carrying Horsa with him, and tore down the hill.

They were beyond restraint now, it was only possible to swing them by

sheer strength out of destruction's way. It was a touch-and-go game from the first.

Just as they got very nearly down the hill, there was a sudden jarring click. Gwen saw her husband's leg drop sharply. He turned one look on her.

"Brake's gone!" he shouted, sawing the mouths of the frantic horses till the veins stood out like cords on his wrists.

He would have felt the whole thing less hideous and awful if even then he could have seen one sign of failing courage in his wife, if she had once clutched him, once cried out, once showed an atom of weak womanhood. But in all the mad tumultuous race with death her calm, inscrutable, half-scornful face loomed on him, watching each movement of his, and not one shade paler.

She was more beautiful and less of a woman than she had ever been in all her life.

They were just at the twist of the hill, the traffic was denser than ever, the carriage swayed wildly, and the shrill screaming of women was giving the last touch to the horses' madness. The final crash was upon them.

"One last experiment," thought Strange, laughing aloud in a grim spasm of humour. "Gwen!" he shouted, "will you kiss me once, as women kiss men?"

She might have done it without that clause, she changed colour for the first time, her mouth twitched, she loosed her hands from their half-mechanical grasp on the seat, and looked in her husband's face laughing above her.

No tears ever held the pathos of that laugh.

“Why can’t I kiss him and be done with it?” she thought wildly. “Truth or lie, what matters it now!”

She moved forward slightly with curved lips, then she looked again, one little look, but it was enough, her hands fell limp into her lap, and she shivered from head to foot.

“No!” she shouted, her eyes aflame, “if that had been possible I shouldn’t have left it until now.”

Then she pulled herself together to show a decent front to death.

The silent laugh on Strange’s face broke into sound, above all the bedlam of clang and yell, then it ceased suddenly.

Great gouts of blood and foam flew to right and left from the lips and nostrils of the horses, who were blind now in their anguish.

“ Hold tight, Gwen ! ” roared her husband hoarsely.

The horses swayed and shuddered, screaming with terror.

With one despairing shriek, Bell covered his face.

The swerving wheel caught in the tram-line and then came the end.

CHAPTER XXXV.

As always happens in such cases it was several minutes after the crash before anyone with an ounce of reason in his head appeared on the scene.

Then a fellow—he was in the dog line, “and knew a thing or two”—dropped in and took a rapid and comprehensive view of affairs, and by the help of infinite blasphemy did what was best under the circumstances.

Strange was only stunned. After a time he sat up, and looked about him.

A howl from Bell struck on his ears. He turned and saw the horses shivering among the broken mass of carriage, and the dog-man rubbing their noses to a soft gurgling accompaniment.

"Where, where?" he asked faintly, and in reply to a pointed finger, lifted himself up with both hands, and groped half-blindly to a huddled-up lump of muslin and lace.

He just knew she was lying there, cold, and white, and moveless. He touched her forehead; it was like marble. He laid his hand on her heart; it was still.

A sudden wonder seized him as to who had undressed and covered her with such

lovely decency, and he looked with half vague inquiry at the two women hovering near.

As a matter of fact it was the dog-man who had done it, with his eyes turned on the two women whom he cursed foully the whole time.

"Have you sent for a doctor?" demanded Strange, forcing the dizziness out of his brain.

"Yes, yes," was yelled from twenty throats, "and here he is."

He was a sufficiently foolish young man, and seemed floored.

"Live far from here?" he asked.

"In Ebury Square," said Strange, "is there any danger in taking her so far?"

"None, if conveyed on boards in a four-wheeler."

Strange saw at once that the dog-man was the only one who had his senses about him; Bell, though absolutely unhurt, was altogether useless, and the other man had been left at the inn.

“You know the horses and cabs here about?” said Strange. “Get the smoothest cab and some boards, and here, you’ll want help, don’t spare tips.”

The man went, and was back before the doctor had made up his mind what to say to cover his ignorance.

A fat woman, who had lent the mattress to cover the boards, and who had been hovering over his wife for some time, here called Strange aside.

“You had better have your own doctor at once,” she said, “that there young man is soft. She wants skill, and, sir,”

she added, with a soft twiddle of her thumb, "I have my suspicions."

Strange looked enquiringly at her, and a cold shiver ran down to his toes.

For hours after she was brought home Gwen lay insensible. The doctor did nothing.

"Her physique alone will help her," he said, when Strange seemed to demand action of some sort.

"She will regain her consciousness all right," he said. "There is another complication, I believe," he added, looking keenly at Strange, "but the treatment of that must come later."

Again the horrid coldness paralyzed Humphrey's very marrow.

"In view of this," the doctor went on, "what about her mother being summoned?"

Strange thought for a moment. Her mother was, of course, quite out of the question, and he remembered that Mrs. Fellowes was ill.

"Is this necessary at once?" he asked.

"No, I will tell you when the need arises—that is, if any should. Her physique would tide over almost anything."

As the clock began to strike midnight, Strange saw the doctor stoop suddenly, and lay his head on Gwen's heart, then open her eyes and touch her eyeballs.

When he raised himself his face had altered.

"Now we shall soon see a change," he said, "perhaps you had better stand back, even the shock of joy might hurt her."

Strange gave a ghastly grin in the shadow of the curtain.

By a superhuman effort in all those hours of anguished waiting, even when the doctor and the nurse, in their consideration, had left him alone for the purpose, Strange had never once kissed or caressed his wife, or even so much as touched her except in matters of service.

Gwen stirred almost imperceptibly, the doctor looked round the curtain at Strange.

“Touch her, and speak to her very gently,” he said.

He bent gently over her.

“Gwen, wake up, dear, wake up, sweetheart!”

He wondered the next second “why the devil” he said it.

Perhaps the absurdity of the words struck Gwen’s grim sense of humour, she

certainly stirred uneasily and made a feeble pathetic little try to throw up the limp hand that lay on the quilt.

Strange moved back under cover of his curtain.

"Good!" said the doctor, "try again." He was watching Strange's face with some interest.

"He has aged ten years in eight hours, poor devil!" he thought, then he took a long survey of his patient, "I wonder if she is worth it all, she is a trifle too superb for me! She looks like one of those women who keep their flesh too much under."

Gradually Gwen's stirrings grew stronger and more frequent, and at last she opened her eyes slowly and looked out with vague questioning.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"You have been ill, dear."

"Ill?" she murmured perplexedly. "I want light."

The doctor moved the screens from before the candles, Gwen raised her head feebly.

"What is it?" she asked again.

The doctor lifted her and gave her a draught he had ready, she was too weak to resist him, and presently she fell off into a drowsy half-slumber.

After what seemed to Strange a lifetime, she again moved, woke, and repeated the old question, this time audibly and with a tinge of imperiousness.

"Ah, she'll do now," said the doctor to himself, grinning a saturnine grin, "when a woman shows her pet weakness she's out of danger."

He put back the screen. "I am thankful to say," he said to her, "you are the sole sufferer, and you'll soon be all right again."

Humphrey was well then. She shut her dazed eyes and tried to think, but she could only hover off into drowsiness.

After a time she opened her eyes again and said,

"I would like my maid, perhaps you would tell Sir Humphrey that I am better."

"Your husband hardly requires the information," said the doctor drily. "I shall leave Lady Strange in your hands, Sir Humphrey, and I shall remain on the premises in case you want me."

His wife turned her eyes away and began searching for her handkerchief, he stooped and gave it to her.

The sweat still clung to his ghastly forehead and hung on his hair.

"He said you were not hurt," she said, "you look as if you were."

"It's been rather a disturbing day," he said, with sudden bitterness. "Never mind me, I'll be as jolly as a sandboy after a bath."

She turned herself uneasily on the pillow and shut her eyes. It was horrible to have him there above her.

"Poor little child, poor little unfinished thing!" he thought pitifully. "Shall I send your maid, dear?"

"Yes, please, and won't—oh, won't you rest?"

"Yes, I'm off," he said, in his old cheery voice, and he went outside the door and watched there till morning.

She was very white the next morning, and kept falling off into drowsy little sleeps, but she declared she was all right and meant to get up; the necessity of staying in bed was a new one and she loathed it.

She felt more in her husband's power, lying there ill; she grew suspicious too, for the first time in her life, and set herself to search for meanings in looks.

"I am demoralized," she kept repeating. Then she turned her face from the light, and neither spoke nor looked except when she absolutely had to.

Strange could make nothing at all of her, and he soon left her for sheer mercy's sake.

When he had gone she raised herself up and rang the bell.

"Give me what I am to take and then leave me for two hours, I will sleep if I can."

The girl brought her a bowl of beef-tea, and she plunged heroically into it.

"I am doing my duty," she said to herself, with a sneer, "but oh, will this liquid never get less? on the contrary, it seems to increase. You won't let me be disturbed, will you, Gill?" she said.

As soon as the girl had gone she got up and locked the door, then she rolled up her hair, put on a dressing-gown, and sat down on the floor.

"I have two hours in which to have it out with myself—this horror made manifest," she said. "How was it that this most natural of all complications never entered my head? I wasn't even warned by those

new and altogether abominable feelings of weakness."

She leaned her head against the ottoman and shivered, then she reached over for a shawl that lay on it, and wrapped herself up in it, but still she shivered.

She stood up and was about to go back to her bed, but she turned sharply round with another shudder, "Bah! I can't," she said and throwing a fur rug on to a couch she lay down there and soon grew warm enough to continue her dreary meditations.

"And so I, I, Gwen Strange, will soon be the mother of a child—and Humphrey its father!"

She hid her face in the soft fur. "It is ghastly!" she cried, "it is degradation, feeling towards him as I do,

and as I've always done! I am debased to think that any man should have the least part of a woman so terribly in his power, when she can't, can't, can't," she almost shrieked, "give him the best. What do girls know of the things they make lawful for themselves? If they did, if they were shown the nature of their sacrifice, then marriage would cease till it carried love, absolute love in its train. Was I mad, my God! was I mad, with all my boasts of sanity?—Nothing, nothing," she moaned, "but perfect love makes marriage sacred, nothing, neither God's law nor man's, and now the climax has come here in the outward and visible sign of my shame—I have sinned, not only in the present and the past but in the future, I have hurt an innocent unborn

creature, I have set a barrier between it and its mother.

“And Humphrey! Now I must sit under those deep all-pervading eyes of his and feel myself ten thousand times his chattel. Now we have a common hope, a common interest, almost a common existence, now every touch of his, every look of his, will burn me and remind me of my shame. Talk of the shame of women who have children out of the pale of marriage, it's nothing to the shame of those who have children and don't love. Those others, they have the excuse of love, that's natural, that purifies their shame; this, our life—the portion of quite half the well-to-do world—this is unnatural, no sin can beat it for cruel baseness!”

She huddled into her rug and lay silent,

wild mad thoughts whirling through her brain. Gradually she grew calmer and more reasonable.

"At least I can do one thing," she whispered.

"I will do all I can to make up to my child for the harm I have done it ignorantly, I will take care of myself, I will do everything I can to bring a natural creature into the world, I will try to protect it from its heredity. I am glad I know, I will do all I can to right your wrong, poor child!"

She waved her hands to and fro in a sort of dumb agony.

"And I could not even kiss your father, I couldn't even kiss him when we both thought we were facing death!"

She suddenly laughed aloud, a low

curious mocking laugh, and put her hands up to her head.

“I must rest!” she cried, “I must not think any more. I will have some more of that draught, it makes thinking a pulpy sweet sort of muddle, it takes all the keen edges off truth. If I did right,” she went on throwing her arms back, “I would go out on a crusade to girls and tell them all the truth, then, let them sin in knowledge not in ignorance, let them know that love, perfect love, is the only sanctification of marriage! Churches and rings are a mere farce.”

She had come to the last shred of her strength; she crept into bed, and rang for her draught.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A FEW days after, she was quite well enough to get up, the doctor told her to do so in the morning, but after looking out into the day she lay down again. She was not quite ready for life yet; here, in her bed, she was more or less aloof from it, but after a few hours restless thinking, getting up, and lunch, came to be a distinct relief.

Directly after lunch she went out for

a drive, and when she returned, and had got into her tea-gown, she went down to her boudoir and threw herself on the sofa with a weary little laugh.

“Why can’t I rest or sew? why won’t my body get as tired as my brain? I could move a hundredweight this minute.”

She got up and moved, with hardly any exertion, a great cabinet that would have tried the strength of a fair-sized man.

“Humphrey declared I couldn’t,” she said, laughing again. “Gru! I can’t sit here and think. I wonder where is Humphrey—I believe I should like to ride a race, or to spend an hour on a switchback railway!”

She went down and wandered from room to room with her long strong movements,

every one of them the very incarnation of healthy grace.

At last she found herself at the door of Strange's den. With a sudden wilful impulse she opened the door and went in. Every window was open, and the soft cool air was playing high jinks among the curtains.

Strange had brought his collection of odds and ends from his chambers, and had scattered them through the big alcoved room in a sort of orderly disorder. The floor was stained and spread with an amazing collection of skins. In his divings into studios he had learnt the comfort and use of screens; there were several in the room, kept well out of the way of knees and shoulders.

Thanks to the draught the cigar smoke

had lost its heaviness, and was floating as a sort of spiritual essence through the textures.

For some minutes after Gwen came in she could hardly discern it at all, when she did she wished she could transport it to her part of the house, it struck her as being a purer scent than one gets in women's rooms.

"How hospitable those chairs look!" she said, feeling one. "Does he lose all his right hand gloves, I wonder! Do all men? As a matter of fact I know amazingly little of men or of their ways! This is a clean, self-respecting room, I like it, I wonder I never took any notice of it before! Ah, another screen!"

She moved it aside and found an alcove where an easel stood, and on this a picture

hidden by a drapery of primrose and chestnut silk.

“The way that drapery falls is quite different from anything else,” said Gwen stepping back a pace or two, “why won’t my tea-gowns go like that!”

Something suggested to her just then to pry no further, but she swept the suggestion aside with the draperies, and saw before her her own painted image. For one minute she felt inclined to rip the canvas from end to end, and to kill once and for all the vague look of motherhood in the woman’s eyes.

“This wretch!” she muttered at last, “so she’s in the house! As if I hadn’t enough to handicap me without her.”

She turned away with a look of loathing and jealous hatred, and sat down.

After a little she got up slowly and turned to leave the room, then almost in spite of herself she went back to the picture and began again her angry eager inspection of it.

As she stood with her head thrown back and her hands clenched involuntarily, her husband came in. He did not see her for a minute; when he did, he stopped, and watched her.

It was a revelation and a shock to see her in this abandonment of jealous anger. He rustled a book on the table to arouse her and quoted, laughing:

“Where the apple reddens, never pry!

Lest we lose our Eden--Eve and I.”—

She moved quickly aside into the shade.

"When did this come?" she asked, in a low constrained voice.

"Brydon sent it a few days ago. You are better?"

"I am quite well, thank you."

"The doctor thinks directly you can travel we had better go into the country."

She flung a swift furtive look at him. "How much does he know, I wonder?"

"Won't you sit down?" he asked, putting a soft low chair within her reach, "and may I smoke?"

She bent her head without speaking, and he saw that her hands were moving restlessly.

He lit his cigar in a leisurely fashion, then he drew up a chair and sat down near her and began to smoke.

After a time he set to wonder how long

this remarkable vigil was going to hold out. He was determined to keep silence till his wife spoke; he saw she was fighting in her dumb concentrated way for expression; he felt certain some sort of an avalanche was about to descend upon him, and he preferred she should set it sliding herself. Perhaps the girl had had too much lonely struggle and her brain as well as her body had weakened with it, at any rate the first thought she felt herself producing audibly was,

“I wish almost you were a fool, Humphrey!”

He took his cigar out of his mouth.
“Indeed, why?”

“Because then,” she said, rather desperately, “I shouldn’t feel so altogether like one myself!”

She stood suddenly up and looked down at him.

"Look here," she said, "you are better in every point than I am, you are better in brain, you are stronger, you have seen more, you know more, you are better all round. If you were a fool you see, I could despise you; if even you had once made yourself ridiculous in my eyes or had demeaned yourself, what I have to say would come easy."

"Come to the point at once, Gwen," he said. "What is it?"

She took no notice of his remark but went to the picture and drew the coverings over the face.

"What has the doctor told you?"

"The doctor has told me nothing definite."

She turned away to hide her hot face.

"You know perfectly well," she said in a low voice, "that I shall be the mother of a child of yours in some months."

"Yes," he said gently.

"But you do not know," she went on, "you do not know that this is such a shame to me, such a deathly burning shame, that I hate the light, I hate the eyes of any human creature on me, I would like to fly in the night to some desert place, and hide myself."

"Are you mad, Gwen?"

"No, I am sane, as sane as on the day I sold myself to you for an experiment. Can you not see, Humphrey, that I am as shameful, I, your wife, as any one of those women you told me of, not one of

whom you loved—loved?” she added, with an involuntary raising of her head.

“I am no nearer to you now,” she went on, “than I was that day, not a jot nearer, and yet I am going to be the mother of your child! Are you dense, Humphrey, or is it because you are a man and are grown used to chattels, that you cannot see the depth of my shame and humiliation, and the reasons for it?”

She faltered and swayed slightly.

“Sit down, Gwen, sit down at once.”

He drew up the chair to her. “The situation seems a curious one,” he said at last, “this outbreak seems to be the climax to a long course of morbid thinking.”

“You cannot understand,” she said faintly.

“I confess I cannot, altogether. When you married me you were no ignorant girl—”

“Humphrey,” she cried, her eyes absolutely burning on him, “I did not think that I should have to defend myself to you in this! I thought you would know the absolute ignorance of girls. It is no veiled ignorance, it is absolute, or else a mere vague—”

“Dear, it was a cowardly and an unjust reproach. However, things have now come to a head with us, it is no use delaying, you want, I gather, a separation?”

She started.

“I thought I would like to go home for a time—alone.”

For a minute Strange considered. “This is no time for softness or entreaty,” was the result of his reflections.

"We need have no legal separation, Gwen—as yet," he added, with slow emphasis.

She trembled from head to foot, he saw it but went on calmly.

"You are not strong enough now for any trouble of that sort, but later on, of course, some arrangement must be come to. By the way, what will your father and mother say of this?"

"They will not say anything," she said bitterly, "they will silently wonder together in the library."

"And Dacre—"

"Dacre is a fool."

"The world?" he asked.

He felt quite interested in the answer, the shock was beginning to freeze the pith in him.

"I don't think the world will speak of me, I have no quality it can seize on for gossip. No gossip has any savour unless it deals with sexual relations and until now I thought I was absolutely sexless," she said slowly, looking blankly out into space.

Her face was awful, her husband turned away from it.

"Gwen, Gwen," he said at last, coming back to her, "do you understand what you are doing?"

"I do," she said heavily, "I cannot bear this shame in your presence, I should lie down and die under it. Can you think I do this lightly, can you not understand the awfulness of speaking such things aloud?"

"I understand it all, dear, but have you

counted the cost, you will be weak and ill, perhaps in danger, can you bear it all? If you finally decide to go alone to your home I will start the same day for Africa. I have been asked to undertake that expedition for the relief of Broad, my old friend, the missionary I told you about. I do not intend to treat this resolve of yours as a freak, Gwen, or to give it the grace of one. You are a strong woman and from your own point of view, sane. Once again, have you counted the cost?"

"I have lived virtually alone all my life," she said, "I think I can bear sickness and pain alone. Humphrey, Humphrey, let me make one excuse for myself? I did not know what marriage was when I tried my experiment."

He looked down on her upturned face with a great tenderness.

“ I don’t blame you, dear. You are sinning terribly, but you know not what you do. Your sin is unnatural, for it is against yourself, you have let a morbid spot in you grow sick to rottenness, and as time goes on, child, you will suffer as few women know how to suffer, you are sinning ignorantly, and your punishment will come, but from another hand than mine. But there is one thing I will speak of,” he said, with grave sternness, “ see that you are not ashamed of your motherhood. Forget, if you like, that the child is in part mine, do not forget that it is wholly yours, bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, beware, at least, of sinning knowingly. You have had

a warning, Gwen, in this, profit by it, don't let this child grow up without knowing the everyday uses of a mother. Don't let any other human creature suffer in this as you have suffered."

Gwen listened to him with bent head, and every word dropped into her soul like molten lead.

There was an awful resistless finality in every word of his, in every tone. He had to stoop to catch her answer, and her face was almost livid.

"I will try and be a good mother, I have no wish to fail in every relation of life."

"Don't move until I return," said her husband.

He went into the dining-room and brought back some wine. She turned on

him a look of dumb protest, but she drank it. "And now, come to this sofa and lie down."

She obeyed him as if she were in a dream, wishing with vague pain that he would touch her, even if it were only once.

After a few minutes she turned from the light to shut out his face. He heard her, and drew down the blind softly; he seemed to her all-hearing as well as all-seeing.

"Oh, if only he were a fool!" she cried to herself, "I might endure it."

The room was cool and still, and the lowered blinds flapping lazily in the breeze were like a lullaby. Gwen was worn out body and mind, and as she lay in the coolness, her hurt heart stopped writh-

ing, her poor foolish shame ceased to burn, her fingers relaxed softly and forgot to clench themselves, and at last she fell asleep like a tired child.

Her husband went softly to the sofa, she started slightly, and a twist of pain came into her brow. He smiled grimly.

“Even in her sleep,” he muttered, “and I am ready to swear that all the time it is only an idea. And now this child—the best shot in my locker, seems about to run an awful mucker in the business. Ah, Gwen, if you only knew what you cast from you in your splendid way!—Ah well, there’s one satisfaction, if you’re not mine, my Gwen, you’re no man’s. Ah, my poor Gwen, my darling, God keep you!”

He stooped down over her and for a

minute or two let her breath come and go on his cheek, then he stood up and went to his writing-table, and let his face fall heavily into his hands.

When he looked up at last at a slight soft rustle of silk, there had gone out of it for ever the look of cool buoyant youth, which was its distinguishing characteristic.

When Gwen awoke the blinds were up and it was dusk, and the tea had just been brought in.

"Three hours at the very least," she thought with much discomfort, as she sipped her tea, "and watched by him the whole time!"

When she had finished her tea she was rising to leave the room.

Her husband stopped her.

"Will you please sit down again for a few minutes?"

"The dressing bell has gone," she said unwillingly.

"That doesn't matter," he said, "we can be late for once. I fancy," he went on coolly, "that your pride is of a sufficiently rational and well-bred order not to think itself obliged to make any difficulties about money matters."

"I will do as you wish in the matter."

"And if any emergency arises requiring your interference, will you consent to act?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"And now," he said, "comes the question of how this business is to be presented to the world."

She raised her head impatiently. "The world won't trouble itself with me."

“You’ll escape better than most women, but you won’t get off scot-free, you are a woman and the world is the world. I will make the matter right at the Clubs; you want to go to your mother for a short time, and I wish to go to Africa where delays are apt to occur, and I have a convenient reputation for vagabondage. If I were you I would immediately inform every woman of your acquaintance of our arrangement in a candid spirit of information. And, Gwen, as the most awful misfortune that ever befell a child is to be cast on the world without a mother, see that your care for this mother’s health, and when the time of peril comes for her life, is as great as mine would be.”

“I shall not betray your trust in any way,” she said quietly.

"I shall not trouble you to write, I shall find other means of hearing of you. But even if you are dying, Gwen, and I know it, I shall not come to you unless you distinctly and in your right mind ask me to do so; then, dear, I shall come; otherwise, and later on, we can make definite arrangements. Good-bye, Gwen, good-bye, dear."

He went to the door and held it open to let her pass.

She paused and turned her two sad eyes on him.

"Go, child," he said gently, "go quickly."

When she had gone he locked the door and fell on the sofa, still warm from her sleeping body, and fought down his agony in decent silence. Then he washed and dressed, and went down to his dinner

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE next day Strange went down and told Mrs. Fellowes more or less about it, and put his wife entirely into her hands.

People were less surprised than might have been supposed at Strange's suddenly-organized expedition. He had broken conventional laws now for so long that if he had settled down into a solid every-day life, without some characteristic protest, he would have been regarded rather as a fraud.

The first possible companion his thoughts fell on, was Brydon.

“It would be bringing him out into the wilderness with a vengeance,” he said, and as a matter of fact it was just what Brydon wanted at the time, and he was overjoyed at the offer.

When Tolly heard of the proposed move, he came to a firm resolve to be in it. At first Strange absolutely refused to take him, but at last his persistence became so annoying that he gave in, but not till Tolly had taken the most powerfully-expressed oaths of abstinence.

When all this was settled, Tolly looked up with a grin and remarked deprecatingly,

“If you hadn’t given in to take me straight, I meant to reach you crooked at Suez, sir, I never intended, your honour,

to let you face them black varmint, without me."

Strange looked at the hideous grinning creature, that one good puff of wind could blow off the face of the earth.

"Do you know you are an idiot, Tolly?"

"Yes, sir," said Tolly cheerfully.

"And that you're very likely going to your death?"

"Not when you're about, sir; death and you ain't mates."

"You're to go with Bell to-day and get rigged out," said Strange.

"Yes, sir, thank your honour, but I've took notice of them pants and sich as were sent to your honour and 'ave hordered the same for myself barrin' a worser quality."

“ Well, upon my word ! ”

“ Arrivin’ at Suez without nothin’ to suit the climate might ’ave inconvenienced your honour,” remarked Tolly, with bland consideration. “ I have likewise perwided a breechloader and a rewolver.”

“ Oh, have you? Bring me those weapons without a moment’s delay, and then go with Bell and get your outfit; I pay for those pants, and now, don’t go about the place crowing over the other servants.”

“ Oh Lord, sir, if you were to hear them over my teeth you’d take back that order. Seein’ likewise that the teeth came out of your honour’s own pocket and are a credit to your establishment, as the dentist hisself said.”

“ Will you be good enough to go to the devil, Tolly, I’m busy.”

"Yes, sir," said Tolly, and he took himself off to crow conscientiously the rest of the day.

For the next two months Gwen comported herself to the satisfaction of no one; she was reticent with the Fellowes, and her mother simply appalled her.

Mrs. Waring's nervous gentle little attempts at being a mother; the delicate tendrils she kept constantly throwing out in her daughter's direction; her queer quaint experiments in the expression of the emotions, simply worried Gwen to death. She refused to let herself see the pathos of it all, or to be touched.

Indeed, as time went on and her weakness grew more apparent to others, the demeanour of her mother grew into a terror to

her. She would fly from it to her own room where she would sit with her idle hands lying in her lap, in a quiet agony of loneliness.

It was a point of honour with her to keep herself calm; she ate and drank too, and she rested obediently whenever Mary, who had taken the physical part of her under her charge, said she needed rest; she drove when the old woman prescribed air, and walked when movement was supposed to be necessary. She was a mere automaton in her absolute yielding to orders concerning her health.

During this time Mr. Waring made a wild attempt to expand into a father. He would issue from time to time from his library with a bundle of random papers in his hand, and entertain Gwen

with discourse, grave and gay, mostly concerning Africa, of which continent he had rather a poor opinion and which he painted with lurid colours.

As he reeled out anecdotes of the gruesomeness of the climate, the impracticability of travelling, the hideous forms diseases assumed, the congenital villany of the natives, more especially of that portion of the land into which Strange meant to penetrate, and of which he certainly possessed a most intimate knowledge, Gwen used to watch him with a curious cold sort of pain; and wonder if he were human, till one day Mrs. Fellowes found out the existence of these ghastly entertainments and stopped them.

One morning when Mr. Waring was

thus engaged, his wife sped away in a half furtive fashion and shut herself into the children's nursery. Kneeling down by the drawers she began to pull out great heaps of soft white lawn and lace and creamy flannel, then with much puzzled doubt she set to sorting the things into little heaps, each after its kind; when that was done she went softly out, and in a few minutes returned with old Mary.

"Has my daughter provided herself with those little things?" she asked nervously.

"I don't know, ma'am, I was thinking of speaking to her on the subject."

"These are good, are they not, the lace seems to me to be real and I do not see any holes?"

"Lord, ma'am, they are like new, it isn't likely that I'd have my clothes torn

after two babies, I've brought a set through six, ma'am!"

"Do the fashions in these things change, Mary?"

"Bless you, no, ma'am! Set up long-clothes babies with fashions!"

"Mary, would you be good enough to get me a pretty basket?"

"You couldn't have a prettier one than this one, ma'am," said Mary, pulling out the old lace and muslin one that had held the belongings of her own baby children.

Mrs. Waring took up the thing and examined it curiously, and thought of the awe with which she used to regard it.

"Do babies nowadays use these things?" she asked.

"Lord, ma'am, yes, and will till the millennium."

Mrs. Waring put the little things in delicately, one by one.

“Now, Mary, I will take them to my daughter,” she said with a little quiver of her lips.

She knocked gently at her daughter’s door.

As it happened she could hardly have come at a worse time. Gwen had just escaped from her father; besides, for three weeks now, there had come no news from Strange, and in spite of herself she was all on edge with unnamed terrors.

When Mrs. Waring’s knock came, she was sitting listlessly looking out of the window.

“Oh, I am so sickeningly tired,” she said, “and I wish she would not always

knock in that tremulous way." She hardened her face and threw the door open.

Her mother gave a quick little swallow and came forward falteringly, while Gwen still held the door open and watched her.

"Will you please close the door, dear Gwen?" she asked.

Gwen complied, and then came towards the basket and lifted one of the white frilly things carelessly.

Suddenly the truth flashed on her and she trembled with indignation, while her mother stood pathetically before her, like a criminal at the bar.

Gwen was the first to speak; her mother's face touched her in a vague way.

"Won't you sit down, mother?" she said, in her cold gentle voice. "Do you

wish me to have these things? I am so very much obliged to you. I ordered some before I left London, but I believe it is always better to have a reserve stock of everything."

"I thought I would like to see a child of yours in the little things," faltered her mother.

A horrible feeling came on Gwen that her mother was about to cry. She took out one or two of the things.

"That is lovely lace," she said hurriedly, "better than any the woman showed me. I had no idea you had any interest in such matters."

Then one fervent wish took possession of her, that her mother would complete her gift and go, but she was not to be delivered just yet.

Mrs. Waring was on her way to the door with bowed head, when suddenly with a short smothered cry she turned and faced her daughter. She saw the quick recoil in the girl's face, and with a supreme effort the small fragile creature calmed herself and sat down.

"Gwen," she said, looking at the tall woman brooding gloomily above her, then at the basket on the bed, "will you try to suffer my love, dear? I cannot ask you for yours, I have not earned it, I never knew what it was to be a mother till too late. But, dear, take the love I bear you gently, don't recoil from me as you did just now," — Gwen winced — "as you've done many times. I will not intrude on you, dear, I have made a mistake to-day

in asking you to accept those things."

"No, no, mother," interrupted the girl.

"Yes, dear, I have, I do not reproach you, but you are hard, and that fault is mine more than yours. When you were a little child, Gwen, did you ever wish for my love—I mean the ordinary outspoken natural love that women give their children?"

Mrs. Waring bent forward and looked into her daughter's face with wide eager eyes.

Gwen looked into the upturned face and her heart stirred with pity, then a dreary feeling came on her, that the time was too solemn for lies.

"I longed for it every day that I lived," she said in a slow reluctant voice, turning away.

“Ah, and now it is too late! I did cling to that last delusion, I did hope that in the careless vigour of childhood, in the fresh joy of a young animal, you might have forgotten to want the outward signs of mother-love. Gwen, Gwen dear, let your child grow into your heart with every breath, and God keep you from suffering such as mine!”

She stood up softly and was about to go, but Gwen stopped her,

“Mother,” she cried, “you couldn’t be expected to understand children, you were meant for intellectual uses altogether! It seems to me hard and unjust that you should now be hampered with these feelings. Why can you not go back to your old peaceful life? You were happy in it, now your work is interfered with, and you

are not happy. I wish I could do anything for you, I wish I could satisfy you!"

"Ah, dear, you don't know how very little love would still my pain, but I don't think that even if you would, you could give it to me—I don't think you understand, dear, what love is."

"Mother," said the girl, in a low curiously soft tone, "I do not."

Directly she had made the confession a horrible feeling of shame came on her.

"She knows everything of me there is to know now!" she thought, with a dull ache, "I wonder what use she will make of it."

After a long wait she got some little idea. Her mother came and stood beside her silently for a minute or two, then she stooped down and kissed the girl's

hand tremulously, took up her basket with its burden, and went out of the room and upstairs.

Gwen looked at the little dent made by the basket on the bed, and a new rush of loneliness flooded her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THERE was always a sort of studious hush over Waring Park encompassing the whole place as in a garment, but one day a change crept suddenly into the nature of the hush, it lost all at once in culture and grew full of trembling awe; for Mrs. Waring lay upstairs on her great oak bed, her blue eyes looking out of her thin face full of a piteous longing.

She had only a slight attack of pleurisy, nothing to account for her quick run down, but her heart was very weak and irregular, the old doctor said, and he asked for an opinion from town.

The shock of the thing had a queer effect on Mr. Waring, even from a physical point of view.

As he sat hour by hour and watched her in a dumb vague horror, one hand always in his, *his* breath came in short gasps with strong pain, *his* eyes grew congested, *his* lips turned a dull blue, and dried and cracked, the very blood slowed in his veins.

The old doctor sounded him anxiously as soon as he noticed his condition, and found his lungs as sound as a bell. It was only that the two were absolutely

one flesh; she could suffer nothing and leave him untouched. She was so sorry for him and whenever she could gather up her strength for the effort, she put a great strain on herself to breathe naturally, but hour by hour her power over herself grew less, and her breathing more constantly laborious.

And Gwen? Fear had found her at last, and it tore and tortured her. She knew very little of sickness, and in this sickness of her mother's there was a pale ghastly shade of some other thing that touched the infinities.

She went in and out of her mother's room in a vague search after duty, but she never touched even her bed; she was afraid of the awful shadowy thing, and more afraid still of her mother's eyes

following her hungrily. No softening grew in her eyes, no love—only fear.

And so the days wore on and the hush fell closer round the house, and crept into the hearts of those that dwelt there.

Yet there seemed small cause for it all, the doctors saw no tangible reason for alarm, and yet they were uneasy and came frequently.

It was the eighth day of the illness, just as twilight was falling.

Mrs. Waring had had her bed moved near the window that commanded the Park, and she was looking wistfully out on to the south terrace watching Gwen walking up and down.

Gwen, in obedience to her promise to take care of herself, always chose this particular walk, bathing herself in the

sunlight and drinking in great draughts of the sweet clear air that came across a heathy hill in the distance, and trying to gather up shreds of happy thought to feed her loneliness with, and to soothe the vague aching that seemed to have made its home in her.

“Mary,” said Mrs. Waring suddenly,—her husband had been literally dragged out for a drive by the old doctor—“will you call Gwen, but first give me that tonic. I feel as if I would slip away in spite of myself, and I know,” she murmured softly to herself, “there is something I ought to say.—Are her eyes still sealed as she walks there communing with her own sad heart?” she thought as she looked out at Gwen. “Will love never touch her—never? Will the child’s life open the

gate—or—must it be the death of that little child?”

She shivered down into the bedclothes, and shut her eyes.

“Ma’am, dear heart, drink this,” said Mary, softly raising her, and with a great leap of her heart she saw death on the white face, “drink it, my dearie,” she repeated returning unconsciously to the old term of thirty-nine years ago, and kissing the little furrows between the brows. “You are very young, dearie,” she said, softly stroking her hair, “not fit to be a grandmother!”

A soft pink flush crept into her cheeks. “Will you please call Gwen?” she murmured.

When Gwen came in, her mother’s eyes were closed and her face like marble.

The girl shivered and half turned; a horrible inclination to fly took hold of her, but she drove back her cowardice and came swiftly up to the bed, one of her full sleeves touched it, and she drew it away.

Her mother's eyes opened just in time to see her little action, she shivered, and Gwen's heart began to ache in a new spot.

"It all seems so hopeless," she thought, "it is so terrible to hurt her, so pitiless, and underbred."

She stooped over her, a tress of hair escaped from her coil and fell on Mrs. Waring's cheek. Neither of them touched it for a minute.

The mother felt a sudden longing to ruffle it softly as she had once done to

a village baby's, and to feel the soft silkiness slip through her fingers, but she restrained herself and only breathed a little quicker.

"You want me, mother?" said Gwen gently, lifting up her head and fastening up her hair.

"Yes, I want you, dear."

She closed her eyes and rested. Gwen moved uneasily, the stillness oppressed her, and some change in the sick woman's face made her heart feel tight. Presently Mrs. Waring drew a long breath and threw off some of the clothes feebly.

"They are so heavy," she said. Mary lifted her higher on the pillows. "Yes, that's better, thank you, and now, Mary, go and rest. My daughter will stay with me."

Gwen heard the resolute masterful use of the word, in absolute terror; she had a coerced, trapped feeling, and for a minute a passionate revolt shook her. What was she to do, to say; she felt as if she were caught in a mesh of bleeding quivering nerves, she found herself drawing her breath almost imperceptibly, for fear of touching raw surfaces.

“What is it, mother?” she cried out.

There was a tone of appeal in her voice, born of her terror. This strengthened her mother; she felt older than her child and with the power to protect her. The ghost of a smile moved her mouth and flickered in her eyes.

“It is death, dear,” she said, with gentle gravity.

Gwen stared at her and in an uncom-

prehending rigid way she repeated—
“Death, death!”

“Yes,” whispered the woman, “it is hard to realize—I have been so strong, but life has been losing its hold on me for some time, I think. Gwen, let me take your hand, dear, touch me as if you were used to it, as if you had tumbled over me and I had played with you ever since you can remember.

Gwen’s hand shook as she gave it with white lips and wide eyes. What was that growing shadow on the small face, what was this bringing such confidence, such a curious compelling air of possession into the timid eyes?

Mrs. Waring gave a soft far-away little laugh, that made Gwen’s blood turn in the ghastly listening silence.

“I saw the other day a young mother, a little creature with blue eyes and yellow hair and so young—so young—put her little baby’s fingers into her mouth, and bite them softly in play, and the baby laughed and kicked. *Jubelte!* Why does English sometimes fall so short? Ah, Gwen, I wish you could have seen it, nothing is like it, nothing—”

Gwen stirred in anguish, her brain was surging wildly, her whole heart and soul were prostrate in one wild prayer for help from the horrors that were closing her in. There was no idea of God in the prayer, however.

“Humphrey, Humphrey, Humphrey!” was the only thought that possessed her, and tried to break aloud in sound through her dry lips.

Then her mother's eyes closed again and she murmured in her half sleep; when she aroused herself after a few minutes her gentle eyes were bright and wild. She caught Gwen's dimpled pink fingers and put them into her mouth and she set to bite them softly and to kiss them with little ripples of a girl's laughter, and her few wrinkles smoothed themselves and the sweet rosy colour came again into the thin cheeks, and she was a careless, happy young mother playing with her first child.

Mr. Waring had come softly into the room some minutes before; he paused and peered eagerly forward, and then there leapt into his eyes a blinding agony; he swayed, shivering, and dropped on his knees by the bed. But of this Gwen saw nothing.

As her mother kissed, and bit, and mumbled over her hand, and half sang little quaint snatches of baby song, and took her pretty fingers one by one and told them with low silvery laughs "this little pig went to market and the other stayed at home!" and broke out into a louder ripple as "the little one cried queak!" her own baby "leapt in her womb" and the scales fell from her eyes and her heart melted within her, and the breast of her dying mother was as an open book to her; she could read all the love there and the remorse and the infinite sorrow.

Gwen's heart stopped and her breath refused to come—she would have died then. Her soul hovered shuddering on the threshold of life, but her baby stirred

imperiously and pulled it back, and then a torrent of tears came to her help and left her with soft moist eyes, a child by her mother's side.

"Mother, oh, mother!" the infinite tenderness in her voice smote into her own heart, and made Mr. Waring rise quickly and wait trembling with fear and a great awe, "mother, oh my darling—speak—touch me—love me, your child, Gwen—!"

"I will not let thee go unless thou bless me." The picture involuntarily rose before Mr. Waring's eyes as he murmured the words.

"Speak to me once, mother—I know everything, now—everything—do you hear, darling?"

But the mother still kissed and played with the trembling clinging fingers, and

sang her soft old songs, and her eyes looked up full of sunny irresponsible happiness, and saw things of which we have not thought in our philosophy.

“Mother, oh my mother!”—but still she babbled on, smiling.

Mr. Waring came forward with bowed head, silent, in fearful reverence.

It was not for him to speak or interfere, the ground whereon he stood was holy ground.

“Mother, mother, mother!”

The babbling had now grown drowsy and low, and Gwen had to bend close to catch it, then it ceased, and the mother lay very still. Gwen turned in terror and saw her father.

“Help, help!” she cried, “she must speak—oh, God! she must!”

Her father took her hand, and bending softly he took her mother's, and held the two in his, and one soft shivering moan broke from him; then father and daughter stood in the palpitating silence and waited breathless, but the silence grew and spread like a net around them, crushing hearts, and the breathing of the woman grew less and less and her face whiter, and then a strong cry rent the veil of awful silence and Gwen fell forward as one dead on her mother's breast.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

“WAS ever grief like unto my grief!” has been the cry of each wrung heart throughout all ages—the truth is, there is a dreary family likeness among them all, and a horrible absence of originality.

In this particular Gwen Strange could score over the whole sad brood, her grief was aloof, alone, it differed in every point from the kindly race of men, it had no balm and less outlet, she could

not cry nor strive, she could not throw her whole soul against fate and fall back with the pain dulled from sheer tiredness.

Every day with the little white mother lying cold on her bed, she still walked in the sun on the south terrace, and cherished her child, but virtue had gone out of her.

"She will kill me," Mrs. Fellowes told her husband, "if she looks like that long! she's not tragic, not an atom, nor dramatic; I think she must look like Dante did when he stood before the gates of Saint Ilario."

"Yes, one hardly dares think of the girl, walking, and eating, and sleeping; and she looks younger than ever I saw her. What is *he* doing now? I must go up soon."

“Sitting holding her hand, except when he is told to come to his meals. Of course, knowing the man, one could describe his grief to a T. It’s just himself.”

“What will time do for the two, I wonder?”

“There is something gone from Gwen that no time will give back to her: I wish, oh, I wish I knew how it was at the end. Did that woman go down into the grave still seeking her lost motherhood? Oh, John, John, God in Heaven help women! I wonder if He knew quite everything when He made us, He is all masculine. I don’t think He altogether did or He would have stayed His hand and have had mercy.”

“My little Ruth, my poor little wife, life even for us is hard!”

“But it is simpler, it is the complications which put barbs on our arrows, the vague yearnings quivering in us ignorantly, not with the knowledgeable, healthy hammer-strokes of men’s anguish; and our bodies are nearer our souls. Think of Gwen with her unborn child under that heartful of unnameable pain! John, it’s only three o’clock—will you drive me into the town, the market is full on—I must see some women who are too stolid for nerves—oh—the letters, and one from Humphrey! John, he’s down with fever, and Brydon’s only half way through!

“‘Not a man-jack of the blacks—being mostly christianized—is worth his salt, only for Tolly we’d cave in altogether, the fellow’s a brick, and seems like developing the beginnings of an intellect, just in the

nick of time too; never in all my life was I so knocked into a cocked hat as by this fever.'

"Look at the writing, John, it's shocking.

"'As for Brydon, he had a narrow squeak, he's out of the bush now, but as weak as a rat. On the whole the sand flies are worse than the fever. Don't dwell on this touch of fever to Gwen, it's really of no consequence, but it's an awful nuisance on account of the delay. From here we go on to a place about a hundred miles off, to where we have traced Broad. Hitherto the blacks have been friendly but beyond the hills I hear we are to look out for squalls. Don't expect many letters after this, as the modes of conveyance are very casual and untrust-

worthy, neither can I count upon receiving our letters safely. I will hurry there and back with all possible speed. I know you will always see Gwen at least once a day.'

"See, John, I can hardly read it, what is it? Oh, 'love for you' and something for the rector I can hardly read."

"We will go in on our way to the market; the ponies are at the door."

Gwen was in her boudoir when Mrs. Fellowes went to her. She was sitting with a bundle of papers in her hand. She thrust them into a drawer, and ran and as it were got into the other woman's arms, and lay there with a short audible movement of pain.

"Tell me just how you think my husband is," she said. Mrs. Fellowes started. "Ah, you're afraid too!" cried Gwen.

“Gwen, I know really very little; those attacks are always very sharp, hardly ever dangerous except with bad constitutions, John says—he has been reading up a medical book about African fevers.”

“‘Bad constitutions and complications,’ the book says, I have it; and he has a complication in some sort of sun-stroke.”

“Gwen!”

“Yes,” she went on in a quiet level voice. “He missed the last mail by some idiocy of the blacks, and he walked ten miles all through a swamp to catch it, with the fever still on him; when he got home he was half delirious. He lay and it seems turned his heart inside out, both audibly and on paper, see, I have it all here in these sheets!” she said, with

bitter irony, catching her breath, as she took them out of the drawer.

“Gwen, my Gwen, what do you mean?”

“I mean he lay there and told out into words—blatant awful English words—on to these sheets, how he loves me, me! but in words no other man ever before used, or dared to use, or the soul of every loved woman would have been annihilated long ago, they are not fitted to bear such magnificent burdens!—He told, too, in precisely the same uncompromising way what he wants of me, and what he considers I am capable of in this line. Mrs. Fellowes, I know just exactly what it cost him to go away! Nothing is hid. Then yesterday—”

She stood up rather wildly—

“Do you know that yesterday I learned in one choking gulp the grinding truth of my mother’s poor tragedy of life, I learned too,” she said slowly, throwing out her arms softly, with a pathetic gesture of appeal, “all in one blinding second my own infinite love for her; but there was no time to tell, she died first. I am crushed with knowledge, I am spared nothing, and then—ah, sickness is degrading! Delilah’s shears are nothing to it! To think that here in my hands I hold the whole unsuppressed heart of a man!”

“But, Gwen, I cannot grasp it—how came you by all this knowledge? Humphrey was too ill to write all that big bundle of sheets.”

“He wrote, as he spoke, in delirium,

part of it is absolutely maniacal, but my God! there is truth enough in it! I see Humphrey's poor sick naked soul in every line!"

She hid her face and moaned softly.

"But, love, I don't understand—how came you by those sheets?"

"Brydon sent the letters. Poor boy, he wrote a little humble scrawl himself, that has a touch of pathos in it."

"I think Brydon was the more delirious of the two! What business has he meddling in matters too big for him!"

"Oh, he's young and very romantic, and—have you ever heard of that picture he painted of me?"

"That sketch for your mother?" she said softly.

Gwen winced.

“No, oh no, one he came down and made of me the day I was married. It ⁱs not me at all, it is a beautiful sexful mother-woman, it was to that woman Humphrey wrote those things! I am the rival of my own picture.”

Mrs. Fellowes jumped up and knelt, weeping bitterly, at Gwen's knees.

“Gwen, send for Humphrey, you are his first duty, he will come in spite of that miserable missionary who never had any business venturing his nose where no one wanted it—he will come to you at once!”

For a second Gwen stared frozenly at her then she drew herself a little away.

“But why, why should I?” she asked.
“Can you not see, my God! can you

not see that I am not ready for him?"

The cold gray of her face turned to a vivid red, and she got up hastily and went to the window.

CHAPTER XL.

GWEN'S duty-forced efforts to comfort her father, were incessant, and rather tragic; he said very little and worked his usual number of hours conscientiously at his latest work, but the best part of him was away. His head bowed a little more every day, his step fell a little more heavily, his eye lost a fresh spark of life; he was following his wife in his patient, well-bred manner, with neither cry nor moan.

Sudden fits of half compunctuous duty would now and again seize upon him, and remind him that he had a daughter who also knew sorrow, then he would pursue Gwen softly, and catch her, no matter how inconvenient it might be, and ply her with questions on embarrassing topics. Gwen was very gentle with him and used to do him small services with a curious shy anxiety that had a touch of motherliness in it.

One day late in August Mrs. Fellowes was sitting down for a brief rest, when to her astonishment Gwen was announced, she had never sought her of her own accord since her mother's death.

She sat down now quite naturally, and looked round the room with a pleased smile.

“Ah! you have altered that bracket, it used to be in the other corner! And the piano, I hardly know if I like it there—I believe I do. I wonder why my tea is never an atom like yours, is it the cream, or the cups, or what?”

When she had drunk her tea she put the cup down and said suddenly, “I would like to go to Strange Hall next week, will you come with me?”

“Next week!” repeated Mrs. Fellowes.

“Yes, I know this sudden move looks rather insane, but I have been thinking it over for some time. The child is Humphrey’s, it has a right to be born in the home of its father, and—and—I cannot go without you!”

“I shouldn’t dream of letting you, my Gwen, only you took me by surprise.

Mary will go too, of course, but what about your father?"

Gwen looked disturbed.

"I don't know. Do you think my going or staying will make much difference to him?"

"I do, dear, a very great difference, but he will think as I do, now you have spoken, that you are doing right. When we are away John will be with him every moment he can spare."

"As if I didn't know that!" Gwen said. "I will tell him to-night."

To the amazement of them all, Mr. Waring, as soon as he had grasped the situation, rose to it in a quite remarkable way; the proceeding on Gwen's part struck him as most fit and proper, and he braced himself up to support her. He also

announced his intention of accompanying the *cortège*.

In the first shock of his resolve Gwen winced; the fact of carrying him in her train and on such an errand brought a spice of ludicrousness into the affair that seemed to her ghastly.

The day before they started she surprised him in the study, grasping in one hand a heap of manuscript in her mother's pretty hand-writing and reading with knit brows a copy of Chavasse's "Advice to a Mother."

This was too much for Gwen, she escaped to her room, and cried and laughed, and cried and laughed again in a perfect paroxysm of grief and piteous amusement.

It was in the end quite a toss-up as to

Gwen's ever seeing her baby at all, she hovered so long on the borders of death. Her silent lonely enduring anguish had shattered her more than any of them had guessed, and then, as ill-luck would have it, the first sound that struck on her ear when consciousness was coming back was the shrill shriek of her lusty boy.

She shuddered down again into the regions of darkness, and it was only after two distracting hours that they got her back among them.

Day after day she held the child and pondered over it; she was very gentle, and ate and drank in an absent way all that was given her, but she hardly spoke at all, some leaven was working in her.

"Then this haunting, sweet-bitter pain

is motherhood," she thought, the first day she was up, as she watched the sleeping child gobbling a red fist, "and it's for this that one half the women in the world live and brood Madonna-like over their infants, with that awful peace in their eyes which takes the commonness from the most common of them! Goodness, what wouldn't I give for just the merest knowledge of that motherhood that rests and broods and commands the world! That painted wretch downstairs is teeming with it, and—it's bitter, it's terrible. to want your mother as I want mine now, to teach me the meaning of motherhood!"

She stood up, and leaned forward over the baby.

"If this feeling grows much more

in me I shall go mad," she murmured, "I am not quite sane now. Baby, my own little baby, can't you help me, to be in absolute touch with the beautiful mysterious things that are the crown of womanhood? Seemingly not," she said turning away, "with all your warm sweetness. I believe I have a fair understanding of this part of a mother, I could make a fool of myself over the tiny thing there, I could—Oh!—Mother, mother! Can I never forget you over my hands! Must a new heartache spring up every hour? Is there rest nowhere?—Ah, Humphrey, if only I weren't myself and you weren't just you, I'd set off this minute and find you!—Certainly I am mad, and here are Mrs. Fellowes and Mary upon me!"

CHAPTER XLI.

ABOUT a month after her child's birth, an urgent message came from Strange's steward to Lady Strange. He was very ill and must see her.

She drove to his house and found him dying, and infinitely concerned that he could not deliver up his stewardship into his master's hands. He was a man who had always rather suffered from a hypertrophied conscience, and perhaps he

exaggerated the importance of his office, and the impossibility of getting anyone to follow him in it; at any rate he impressed Gwen a good deal, and rather put her on her mettle.

After reviewing the situation, she came to the conclusion that if no one else could keep things straight she would undertake to do it herself. As she took off her things, a new complication struck her; to do this she must be on the spot, and how would that suit her father?

She was rather absent and full of the question when she got down to tea, and Mrs. Fellowes, as a sort of cure and antidote to her wistful aloofness, went and brought the baby. And then Mr. Waring came in and contemplated it silently, as

he had done every day since it was born.

Gwen told them of Hopkins, and in a rather shy tentative way spoke of her project.

To her astonishment Mr. Waring woke up fully, and spoke with hearty approval of it, then without giving her a chance to reply, he went out but soon returned with a large parcel of manuscript, tied up laboriously with string, the knots all over it in haphazard style.

"This is the book," he said slowly, and with frequent pauses, "on which we have worked so long, it is at last complete. It is sad, is it not, that it is only I, who am here to see the end? I have been more than once afraid that I should be unable to finish it, it is hard to work

alone, old habits are strong within us—I will attempt no new work.”

He swayed a little and leaned heavily on the table. “You, my daughter, have your work here, you must uphold the house of your husband and of his first-born; to-morrow I will go home.”

Gwen attempted to say something, but he motioned her to silence.

“You may perhaps think your duty is with me, it is not, it is here, and here you must remain to guard your husband’s lands, and to cherish his child. It is the soul that is just entering life that needs all your care, not that which is done with it.”

Then he went and stood over the child, and suddenly some vague old feeling surged up in him and he raised

his hands that trembled above its head, and his lips were moved by a mute blessing.

Mrs. Fellowes intended going herself early that week as she was a good deal wanted at home, but she could not bring herself to leave Gwen entirely alone, and then she had not heard a word of Humphrey from his wife's lips for more than a month now, and his letters to her, after one she got assuring her of his perfect recovery, were anything but satisfactory, they were short and dry and told her nothing. Then, as the missionary he was in pursuit of, had escaped through the intervention of a tribe of friendly blacks some other way, and was already on his way home, probably preparing his experiences for the religious press, Humphrey's

continued presence in Africa was simply ridiculous, and she was in a fever of anxiety as to the next step of this most trying couple.

A few nights after, she was very glad she had decided to remain.

She had just fallen off into her first sleep when she was awakened by a violent shake, and found Gwen standing above her white and rigid and too terrified to speak. She pulled her out of the room and into the nursery by her nightdress sleeve, to show her her baby in very bad convulsions in the nurse's arms.

The whole night through, the two women watched the strange cruel possession that twisted and contorted the small flower-like face and the tender

limbs, and next day the spasms ceased and a sharp attack of bronchitis set in.

Gwen's mute tense agony upset even the old doctor, who as a rule was emotion-proof enough; he would have given a great deal to have been able to reassure her, but he could not in conscience do so, the child was about as dangerously ill as it was possible for it to be.

But he came of a lusty stock, and fought gallantly for his life, while his mother hovered breathless above him, and allowed no one but herself to touch him for any service, and when she absolutely could keep her eyes open no longer, she would trust him to no one but Mrs. Fellowes.

As she fought desperately for her child's life, the girl for the first time in her own, lost herself in supreme self-forget-

fulness, and then at last the latent truth in her nature broke through its bonds and unfolded itself hour by hour, and overpowered though she was by grief and terror on the child's account, Mrs. Fellowes blessed God and rejoiced.

The splendid reserves of the girl's tenderness, her lovely frank abandonment to her new-found motherhood, fairly staggered the elder woman. She could hardly keep control over herself, she felt so small, so humble, so absolutely unfit to do as she ought to do. There was to her something most holy, most reverent in the awakening of this virgin mother, she felt almost indecent in her greedy absorption of its regal loveliness, and this time God did stay His hand and His heart inclined itself to mercy.

Seven days after the beginning of the illness a little ray of hope set to play in the doctor's eyes, and sent a wave of new sweet life rushing through Gwen's veins.

The next day, and the next, this grew and strengthened, and at the end of the day after that the doctor spoke with perfect confidence, and he added,

"I never until now knew exactly how much a mother's love can do, Lady Strange. You are an incomparable nurse."

When he went away Gwen still knelt by the cot, with moist eyes, and looked at the baby, who suddenly stirred, and awoke, and began to watch her in that terrible all-knowing way babies have, then a little wavering ghost of a smile touched its mouth. Gwen waited with parted lips,

and the smile grew and took proper tangible human shape, till the tender mouth gave a little tremble with it and the eyes widened, and suddenly, to Mrs. Fellowes' horror, Gwen fell back against her in a dead swoon.

When she had recovered and they had brought her to her room, she fell asleep at once, and it was midnight when she awoke.

She got up directly and stole softly out to see her baby, who was sleeping peacefully with Mrs. Fellowes on guard.

"He couldn't possibly be better," she whispered, "you must go back to bed at once."

"And you—you must too, you look green with tiredness."

She knelt down by the cot with a

little soft cooing sound that half frightened herself, she turned her head to find out where it came from, when she knew she smiled up at Mrs. Fellowes, and her eyes were radiant with a sweet mystery.

When she came in to see her baby next morning she carried a telegram she had just written, in her hand. It was to Strange and very simple.

“Will you come?” it said, “we want you, baby and I.”

“Read it,” she said to Mrs. Fellowes, “and will you send it yourself?”

She stooped over the cot for a long time, and nothing was to be seen of her but the tips of two pink ears.

CHAPTER XLII.

“How soon can he come?” said Gwen, when Mrs. Fellowes returned after sending the message. “I have been counting up, it must be three weeks even if he is at the coast; if he is inland, it may be longer. Now the missionary is safe, he must be just hunting, he will be sure to get my message without much delay.”

She spoke rapidly and walked about

the room with her boy in her arms.

"She hasn't a doubt as to his reply to her message," thought Mrs. Fellowes; "how absolutely she trusts him!"

"Will he wonder when he sees I am here—will he guess why I came?" she went on in her glad excitement. "Darling, sweet, beauty! What will he think of you?"

"Gwen, sit down, or let me take him, you are not perfectly strong yet."

"I am," she cried, with a happy laugh, "I am a giant refreshed with wine, a whole volume of new life has flowed into me, I could move the world at this moment, not to say carry this mite. I am a woman at last, a full, complete, proper woman, and it is magnificent. No other living woman can feel as I do; other women absorb

these feelings as they do their daily bread and butter, and they have to them the same placid everyday taste, they slip into their womanhood; mine has rushed into me with a great torrent—I love my husband, I worship him, I adore him—do you hear, my dear?”

She stopped in her march, and turned on Mrs. Fellowes a radiant triumphant face.

“Ah, if I hadn’t you to tell all this to, I would go out into the fields and shout it aloud. And what are *you* crying for, I am not mad? I am, I suppose, what Humphrey would call natural, but somehow it makes me feel too big for the room. Hold the child while I open the windows.”

Mrs. Fellowes, as soon as she got hold

of him, carried him off to the nursery, and simply insisted on Gwen's lying down and holding her tongue.

"Do you want to bring a fever on yourself," she demanded sternly, "and be a scarecrow when Humphrey comes? You are shockingly young, my Gwen!"

She was sane after that, and tried to behave as if nothing had happened to her, but the change in her was quite visible to the naked eye. Next day she buckled to her steward's work with a whole-hearted dominance, that ensured success, and Mrs. Fellowes went home to her husband big with happy news.

* * * * *

When five weeks had passed, and she

had neither message or sight of Humphrey, Gwen's magnificent abandonment of joy had a break, and a trembling came into it, and into her eyes a wave of fear, and every time she came in from her work in the village or on the home farm, she betook herself to the baby to steady her nerves.

And then the press began to set flying little gnat-like biting doubts as to Strange's unaccountable silence, after it was ascertained through a long-delayed scrap of a note to Mrs. Fellowes that he had joined an ivory expedition into an unsettled district. Then to add to her anxieties, the missionary, grateful for his intended capture, ran down to Strange Hall, and being rather an ass, and having been left with only the tail end of a constitution—a

solemn and gloomy one—he gave her a most lurid and awful impression of those parts into which Humphrey had penetrated.

She put a brave front on, but she had a shocking time of it, and her usual song to her baby in exactly Humphrey's tones was,

“Dann willst du weine, du liebe kleine!”

which the baby looked upon as a huge joke.

Week after week passed and not a word, and then whisperings of relief expeditions began to stir the papers, and Mrs. Fellowes was hurrying up wildly with her work to be able to get to Gwen.

At last she came over from the station in a fly, a day or two before she was expected, and found Gwen in Strange's den,

which showed tokens of her all over the place, playing with her child, now a big fellow who beat the record in the matter of crawling.

When the nurse took him at last, Gwen said to Mrs. Fellowes rather grimly,

“The county considers I should wear a widow’s cap, and sport crêpe, and my horrible state of plumpness makes me to stink in their nostrils. Just look at my arms! I wish I could oblige them,” she went on wearily, “and bear my woe according to their rules of decency. Lady Mary rolled down on me and stayed a week, and never got out what she came to say until I was putting her into the railway carriage on her way back to London, then she produced her rebuke on the top of a sigh, and began a prayer, but the

train started before she got well into it.

“‘My dear,’ she said, ‘I think that under the circumstances a plain black gown and a bonnet—hats to my mind are at present unseemly—and then, my dear Gwen, if by any means you could manage, ahem, not to *add* to your plumpness—people in our position must set an example—I assure you, for myself, I lost eight pounds and a half the first six months of my widowhood.’

“Then she began her rather irrelevant prayer.”

“Gwen, sit down, and I’ll make tea, and tell you about your father.”

Gwen leant back in her chair and put her hands to her hot head.

“I forget everything but myself and this fattening misery of mine. He is

failing very much, is he not? His letters somehow have a fragile sound. They have a horrible habit of making me howl, I have got so maudlin I howl now quite easily; he has been at 'Chavasse' again, and to rather an awful extent."

"Yes, he is failing day by day, and unfolding himself at the same time. I never quite realized before how beautiful and single-hearted his character is; he comes now to see me, or rather to sit and meditate in my presence, after he has been to your mother's grave, and when he has sat and rested, he speaks of you. You can gather the way, I fancy, from his letters—oh, the quaintness, the pathetic grotesqueness of his remarks!"

"I have often wanted to ask you if Mr. Fellowes ever brings his professional

capacity to bear on my father?" asked Gwen.

"Never. 'Only God is fit to undertake the care of such a soul as his,' John says, 'neither he nor his soul are subject to ordinary laws, each lives out the life given it to live.' Good gracious! fancy John or any other parson attempting to shove theology into such a nature, or to dig down after his beliefs! Gwen, darling, you may be in good condition, but how very tired you look!"

"Tired! Oh yes, I am, I cannot tell you how tired! At first I used to live in a whirl so as to tire myself, now there's no need of it, I am just as tired when I get up as when I go to bed, and nothing will drive the days on, and the endlessness of life sickens one. I feel

crêpey enough to please anyone, goodness knows, but even if Humphrey never comes, I will neither wear crêpe nor put on any of the trappings of decent widowhood, for I know he never got my message. If he is dead, he died knowing nothing, I am no honest widow of his, and I will wear hats to the end of the chapter, and possibly grow fat and outrival Lady Mary, who knows!

“ You see, my life is a healthy one, I ride miles a day all over the farms, there isn’t a fact concerning manure I couldn’t tell you; as to drainage, I feel like turning into a pipe myself; I have even a medicine chest, and doctor the babies, Heaven help them! If I could only follow him as he would me, it would be less awful, but you see, there’s baby,

my place is here, and I must just stand and wait like those wretched creatures in the hymn. As for those relief expeditions, though I send cheques, I look upon them as a farce, as if he wanted to be caught and brought home like a missionary!"

"It seems to me you are on the go from morning to night, what time do you leave yourself for sleeping?"

"Oh, any amount, more than I want."

"How long did you sleep last night?"

"Oh, I forget. Are you too tired to drive to a farm about a mile away?"

"Tired! No, dear," stooping down and kissing her, "but must you go? Lie down, and let me read to you."

Anything in the shape of tenderness was just the one stroke too much for

Gwen, she gave a quick dry sob and moved away.

“I can’t stand that sort of thing,” she said, “I told you I had got maudlin. Treat me as you would a nice orthodox Christian widow, who wears crêpe and caps and gets just to the proper state of thinness, pulling herself up, however, just short of scragginess like a self-respecting creature. And now we must hurry, for I hear the carriage.”

She turned round as she was leaving the room, and laughed.

“I am altogether losing tone. Do you know that young Will Dyer—Sir William’s black sheep, whom I have been occupying my spare moments in being a mother to, and in trying to detach from the devil—began yesterday to make violent love to me?”

"I don't wonder!"

"Good gracious me, why?"

"Look at your face! You are a woman now, my good Gwen."

"And is this the first result? God help us! Is my one pride in life to become a thorn in my flesh?"

"That's as you take it! It will, unless you are careful, be a very considerable thorn in other people's. Good gracious, child, why even virtue in women is very much a matter of temperament, and where the temperament is, there will the opportunities be gathered together."

CHAPTER XLIII.

LATE one afternoon, two men, looking unspeakably battered, got into a fly at a small off station and told the man to drive them to Strange Hall.

“I’ll not show to a soul for a week,” said the first man, who, if one looked at him microscopically, seemed like the remains of Strange, “never in all my life have I felt so humiliated. To be held by the leg by a parcel of niggers for the

best part of four months, and at my age, is too much for any fellow."

"You were next to off your head most of the time, and then only for us you'd have escaped long ago," said Brydon.

"Don't try to find excuses, it's too damnable altogether, and to think after all that those idiots got home months sooner, laden with ivory!"

"After the week what will you do?" asked the other looking out of the window. "You'll show yourself to your people directly you are presentable, I suppose?"

"Give interviews to reporters probably," he returned shortly.

Brydon furtively watched the gaunt shattered man, old before his time, who not so very long before had looked as if he could move the world.

“ Oh, that woman ! ” he thought savagely.

Almost in spite of himself he had become the keeper of all the elder man's secrets, and the office weighed frightfully on him.

By some extraordinary mischance, neither the letters sent at that time, nor the cablegram, ever reached Strange ; they came some time after the expedition had gone, and in transmission were lost, and the negligent messengers thought best to entirely deny the existence of any.

When Strange enquired at the office at Cairo, there was no account of any cable for him, the clerk who had received it had been exchanged, and Strange made no very pressing enquiry, for he hardly expected one, and as a P. and O. boat was starting the next hour, he took passage on her and

went on board—even giving the reporters the slip.

As a matter of fact, he was so desperately ill at the time that he was hardly responsible for his actions, or he must have recovered the record of the cable, and both Brydon and Tolly were too much occupied in the attempt to get him home alive to think of anything else. They succeeded as it turned out, but only by the skin of his teeth.

On the whole, despite certain eccentricities, both Tolly and Brydon had done better than any other men possibly could have done, their sentimental devotion to Strange put starch into their rather limp souls, and their uncomplaining heroism under the most shocking sufferings was almost pathetic, and then by some special

providence, they had both escaped the second fever that nearly put an end to Strange.

“What’s that, do you see, in the field there? My eyes are beastly dim yet,” said Strange, peering out at some object a few fields off.

“I don’t know, it looks like a hump.”

“Driver, just turn into that lane and take the south road.—It’s a silo! By Jove! Old Hopkins is coming on, and look, all that waste moor under cultivation! I always said it would grow potatoes. Seemingly the place is not neglected. Hopkins was always a good fellow, but I had no idea until now he wasn’t also an ass. I dreamt frequently of that ensilage scheme, someone else has hatched out my dream for me. Oh Lord, here’s

this shivering on me again! Where's the draught?"

"In your breast-pocket."

"Tell him to wait, I can't get in like this, 'there's a decency to be observed!'"

The driver waited, revolving in his mind suppositions as to his remarkable fare, and wondering why "in the devil's name" the trap shook as if it had the palsy.

After quite half an hour it stopped and he had orders to go on, while Strange mopped the cold sweat from his face with a trembling hand.

"This degrades a fellow!" he muttered. As a rule he pulled himself well together after these attacks, but this time he got no reaction.

When they reached the door he was almost unconscious.

“Take me quietly to my den,” he muttered, “don’t let the servants bother me.” Then he fainted dead off.

CHAPTER XLIV.

As he lay in the death-like sleep of exhaustion that followed his swoon, the change in Strange was terribly evident. He had shrunk to half his former size, his clothes hung in bags on his limp, thin limbs, his eyes were sunk into deep hollows, his skin was yellow and puckered, and his lips were drawn back from his teeth in a way that told of fever and thirst.

When Brydon, with the help of the panic-stricken servants, had got him to the sofa, knowing his horror of fuss, he told them to send at once for the doctor, and then dismissed them with the utmost speed—and now he stood at the window revolving many things, and wondering, if Strange grew worse, what would happen, would he send for his wife, and would she come?

“My God! I wish I did not know quite so much of him,” he muttered, “I wish he had not, in his ravings, turned himself inside out in that ghastly way. No man should know so much of another fellow as I do of him, it is like eaves-dropping.”

Strange moaned, and Brydon crept over and covered his feet with awkward tenderness, then he moved softly through the

rooms, looking at the skins and Oriental stuffs, the colours of which slid into him, and comforted his soul to some slight extent.

He was vaguely fingering a piece of drapery, when he struck his foot against the leg of a chair, he looked round breathlessly to see if he had disturbed Strange. No—he still slept, and Brydon continued his purposeless inspection, and, drawn by some strange coloured texture he went towards it, and came face to face with his own bride-picture.

He staggered back two or three steps in a spasm of terror. He had learnt a deal too much of that picture in Strange's ravings, but the overmastering love for one's own creation—inherent in God and man—forced him back to it, and as he looked, all the past died out, right back to

that day when he was sitting in Waring Church, painting, and wiping great sweat-drops from his face in the ecstasy of knowing that he had done a great work, and one that would live for ever.

A sudden indefinable sound from the terrace brought him to himself.

It was a queer primitive sound; he felt somehow that Strange should not hear it, and went to the window to find out what it was.

Presently it began again, and ended in a chuckle, then he caught sight of a flutter of petticoats around the corner, and could distinguish a murmur of words. Then a distinct squeak startled him, and suddenly a toddling creature appeared on the terrace, and making a grab at a flower fell sprawling on its face, and in a fraction of time was pounced upon by the owner of the

white skirts, who cuddled it to her breast, with anxious care, but as it only kicked and crowed she lifted her head from her kissing. And there within ten paces of him was his picture made flesh, but with the sorrow of all ages upon her face.

He swayed, put his hand to his head, then he dropped like a man in a dream into a chair, and murmured,

“Oh, God! has the earth opened—has she fallen from Heaven—has—has——”

He looked again and the flutter of her white dress in the sunlight gave to his dazed, enchanted eyes, the figure of a new Madonna, before whom the whole world must kneel and rise up to call her blessed.

She came on, still murmuring to her baby, she came up to the French window, and put out her hand to open it—then

the madness fell from Brydon, and the whole truth came with a rush.

He sprang to his feet, cast one perturbed look at Strange, "Kill him or not, I can't face it," he muttered, and fled.

When Gwen got into the room, she sank wearily into a chair, and throwing off her hat let the baby butt her at his will.

When the smile for her baby flickered off her face, the final contained anguish of it was awful, but the child gave her little time to nurse grief. Every moment she had either to rock him, croon little songs to him or tickle him, if she were silent or passive for a moment a lusty butt against her breast or a punch from the pink dimpled fist brought her back to his service.

As she sat—sideways to the window—it

was impossible for her to see Strange, but there was nothing to hide her from him.

The soft murmur of croons and baby-sounds at last half awoke him, he lay for some moments and let the vague music creep into his semi-consciousness, then he opened his eyes impatiently and closed them again—it was only one more dream, he thought—he was beset with dreams, tortured, shaken by them.

“Oh, God! those drugs,” he muttered.

Again the murmurs broke on his ears, there was a chuckle, a tender protesting voice, and a sharp little squeal. He shivered and peered out towards the sounds, his eyes were dimmed from his great sickness and could only see “men as trees walking.” Gradually he made out

the shapes of a woman and a little child.

“Is it a dream, or death?” he murmured.
“Oh! God, spare me! I am haunted by delusions.”

Another little murmur, and a soft low sob, it was the woman this time. Again he opened his eyes and through his dreaming saw the little yellow-headed child laughing around the chair, and inviting the woman to a game of bo-peep.

“Oh! my baby, my own, own baby,” she broke out, stooping to him, “do you know what they say—what they din into my ears, little love, dear baby mine? They say your father is dead, *dead*, DEAD, dear one. And must you live, grow up, little manikin, without knowing what a man he was?—Sweet, must I sing?—Ah! If you only knew how it hurts!”

The smile flickered back to her face, as she took him on her knee, and she sang a little song he evidently knew well, for he kicked and crowed by way of chorus, then he played with his bare toes for a little—his mother, as she sang, had pulled off his socks to kiss his feet—and as he played she returned to her sad soliloquy.

“You will have to take all from me on trust, little one, and, of course, you will think I exaggerate, my own, when I tell you that your mother had the best man that God yet made or will make, to love her, to love her.—Ah! what love it was!” she repeated gently.

Then her eyes dreamt, and rested for a moment, all the pain fled, and her face shone with radiant triumph and her mouth trembled like a happy child’s.

“Ah! what love!” she said again; but instantly all this was swamped in a mighty wave of pain—she caught her child and kissed him rather wildly, whispering, “Baby, she killed this man who loved her—killed him, baby, because she was unnatural and couldn’t love—she killed her mother too, and oh! baby, when in her loneliness she pleads and prays that God may let her love Him, He hides His face from her, and it is all quite just, baby mine, her mere desert.

“Ah! my own—I can’t sing, I am so tired.”

She put him down gently, and looked before her with sad unseeing eyes.

Strange struggled to break the spell—to speak—to move—but he was impotent—paralyzed. A vague horror—full of sickness and delirium—had him by the throat.

He put his hand feebly to his forehead to brush the sweat away.

“This is more cruel than death,” he muttered.

Meanwhile, the baby—being a young person of an exploring tendency, and loose on the premises—played havoc with his opportunities. Having smashed two Venetian glasses and an atom of old Sèvres, he perceived his father on the sofa, and toddled over to investigate him—but so softly that no notice was taken till Strange suddenly found a tiny fist thrust into his mouth, then he started amazedly and touched the child with quaking awe.

Just then Gwen discovered her loss, ran a few steps forward with outstretched hands, and saw the two—Humphrey and his child.

“Humphrey—Humphrey!” she cried faintly, tottering towards them—then she fell at their feet.

To Strange it was still a cruel dream—her falling but part of it. Between the two, the child stood wondering, then he caught sight of a diamond on his father’s finger. He seized on the finger and dragged it to show his mother, but as she took no notice, he smacked her face soundly with his other hand—and simultaneously the two awoke, he from his delirium, she from her swoon.

And for one moment the two of them peered at each other through the fog of a bitter past. Then she sat up slowly, and looked at his face marvelling above her, and at his hand caught in her baby’s, and broke into half incoherent wild explain-

ings. But suddenly the consciousness that words could in no sort of way touch her case, silenced her; she just sat dumbly on the floor, knowing that she had done evil in ignorance but that she had come up through great tribulation into unutterable joy, full of knowledge, and with a soul as white as Naaman's skin. And so—as best became her—she simply held up her face to be kissed, while the baby clutched hold of one of her fingers and one of his father's, and in words all his own and untranslatable, but mightier than those of gods or churches, decreed that henceforth and for ever those two should be one flesh. Which, after all, is the especial mission of his kind.

THE END.

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CHAPTER IV.

(Reprinted from Hooks of Steel.)

HE stopped when he saw us, stopped dead short on the pavement amidst all the hurrying people. And as he looked at me and D'Arcy, his face changed and grew drawn and old with sharp, sudden misery. I had pierced him to the heart; in his face I saw it. Sick and cold with shame, scarce knowing what I did, I shrank back in the hansom. Only for a moment, but it was a fatal moment.

"Yes, that's right, keep back, hide, I'll protect you!" called out D'Arcy to me loudly, so loudly Felix could not fail to hear. Then placing one hand familiarly on my shoulder, he opened the trap-door again with his cane and shouted—"Off!"

Without an instant's pause the driver whipped up his horse and was off as hard as he could go.

I recovered myself when I found I was being borne away from Felix.

"Stop!" I cried wildly, swinging back the doors in front of me, "let me get out. I must go back! I must go back to Felix!"

D'Arcy leaned forward and hastily swung the doors together again.

"You can never go back to Felix," he said, seizing me and holding me firmly down in my seat. "You will have to stay with me instead. Felix would not have you now. He has caught you here in London alone with me; *he has found you out.*"

Appalled by his words and manner, I turned upon him. His face was still full of malignant triumph, his small dark eyes burnt as they gazed into mine, his lips were drawn back from his big white teeth in a wide grin. It was a full revelation this time. I knew him as he was; loathsomely, horribly ugly and wicked.

"You are a fiend!" I cried. "I know you now. You arranged it all. You deliberately took me where you knew Felix would see me. It was a vile plot. I see it all, and I hate you, I hate you! Do not dare to touch me. Take your hands off. Let me get out and leave you this instant."

But D'Arcy only held me down more tightly. I dashed my hand upwards through the opening in the roof and called to the driver to stop. "No use," said D'Arcy. "The man is in my pay. You may as well sit quiet, Rosamund. I shall be very kind, you have nothing to fear."

Nearly frantic, I called to a passer-by to help me. Then D'Arcy shouted to the driver to let down the glass, and I found myself more straitly imprisoned than ever. By this time we had left the Strand far behind us, and were dashing up quiet side streets, but in what direction I knew not. It was like a horrible nightmare: on and on we went, and each step took me more hope-

lessly away from Felix. In vain did I struggle, in vain did I cry to be set down. The driver took no notice of my cries, and D'Arcy, still with that horrible grin on his face, said never another word, only held me back tightly in the hansom. I cannot say how long that terrible drive lasted. My mind throughout was a chaos of horror and despair.

At last, after long hours as it seemed to me, the hansom stopped, and D'Arcy called to the man to open the window. We were in the middle of a broad path bordered with trees, and all around us was silent dreary park-land. A drizzle of rain had begun, and beneath the trees it was already dark with the fast gathering shades of a winter evening. Here D'Arcy loosened his hold of me, and instantly I got out. Where to go and what to do next I knew not, so stood helplessly in the rain. D'Arcy sat looking at me for a moment, as if thinking, then got out also.

"There is the sovereign," he said, handing up some money to the driver. The man took it, glanced at me, and hesitated.

"You can go," said D'Arcy sharply.

"And leave the young lady in the rain?"

"Did you hear? You can go," repeated D'Arcy, still more sharply. The man drove away. I felt too stunned to make any appeal to him. Besides, of what use? Was it not he who had driven me on and on, in spite of my cries, until now miles and miles of unknown streets lay between me and Felix. If I had been in the middle of a wilderness, and Felix the other side of the world, he could not have felt more lost to me than he did at that moment.

"Now, Rosamund," said D'Arcy, turning to me and speaking very determinedly, "listen to reason and be a sensible girl. *You have lost Felix.*

You are not so mad, I suppose, as to imagine he will have anything further to do with you after this. You lead a miserable life at the castle, and it will be still more miserable to go back there now, for Felix will never visit you any more. Neither will I come there after you again. I have had enough of it, I want something better. So if you go back, you go back to be absolutely alone with a madman and his keeper. Mark my words: your uncle is not, and never will be cured. At his best, he's as mad as a hatter. And he's liable to these attacks of violent madness which make him absolutely dangerous. Matthew keeps it dark, but it is not the first time your uncle has had to go to the asylum by any means. He'll break out again as sure as my name is Leigh, perhaps next time without any warning. That happened once, so may well happen again. There's no method in his madness: a thoroughly unreliable madman, my friend on the common calls him. So that's the companion you will go home to.

"Now I have it in my power to offer you a very happy life. I love you, and I want you to be my wife. You are just fitted for a London life, and with your beauty and originality might make a perfect furore. Now, will you accept what I offer you and marry me? You have only to say 'yes,' and I will take you straight to my sister who will act as chaperon until we can be married: She is a good-natured girl, and will be glad to oblige me, for many reasons. Now say, will you marry me? I'll be awfully kind to you, Rosamund. After all, you'd have had a slow time of it with that impecunious Felix."

I had been listening in a dull, stunned way to this speech, but at his last words an hysterical passion of anger awoke within me.

"Marry you! Never! I would rather die," I cried. "I know you at last for what you are, a wicked, plotting fiend!"

"Now, now! No nonsense," said D'Arcy angrily. "Remember, Rosamund, you are very much in my power. You don't know where you are, night is coming on, it is raining faster every minute, and you can't find your way out of this place, or get a cab, without me. So give me a kind answer, and let me take you off to my sister's. Come, child, don't be foolish, we can't stand here an hour, getting drenched. Be nice, I've loved you a long time, and been your most devoted slave, I am sure. Give me a kiss, and say you'll come."

"Never! Keep off! How dare you?" I cried, trembling with mingled fear and anger.

"You needn't be so very particular. I'll be bound you've kissed Felix hundreds of times."

"Felix! Yes. But you—you!!" Words failed me. I could find none that would express my detestation of him.

He pressed closer, as if determined to kiss me. Then my passion grew beyond my control. I seized the cane he was holding in his hand, and struck him smartly across the face with it. Then I flung the hateful thing from me amidst the trees.

"There!" I cried. "That is to show you how I loathe and detest you now. Go and pick up your cane, the cane you used to help you in your plotting. You have wrecked my life. You have ruined Felix's. You have persuaded me to deceive, and dragged me down to misery. Go, and never let me see your wicked face again."

D'Arcy made for an instant as if he were going to strike me in return, but he restrained himself. "All right," he said, in a voice trembling with suppressed rage. "All right, young

lady. You have given me my *congé*, and I'll take it. I don't feel so anxious to make you my wife as I did a moment ago. I'd best not saddle myself with a vixen. I'll leave you, to find your way back to the castle. I hope you will enjoy yourself when you get there."

Then, without another word, he strode away and left me alone in that strange place in the rain.

I waited until he had disappeared in the darkness, then turned and walked in exactly the opposite direction, neither thinking nor caring where I was going, so dulled was I with misery. But the road went on, and seemed as if it would never end, and at length I stopped, chilled, wet, and weary. Then suddenly it occurred to me that I ought to try and get home; there was just a faint chance that Felix might go down to ask what it all meant. At the thought that he might arrive at the castle, find me still absent, and imagine me still with D'Arcy, I began to burn with fever. I turned, and ne'er through an arch so hurried the blown tide, as I through the rain and the dark did hurry then. Thinking it would now be best, I followed the direction D'Arcy had taken, and after a time came to some big iron gates. Just as I passed through them a hansom came driving towards me. My first impulse was to accost the driver, but I pulled myself up just when about to speak, for by the flickering light of the gas-lamp on the gate I saw it was the man who had driven me away from Felix. With my head down I hurried past him.

"Missy! Missy!" called the man as I passed. I made no answer. He turned and drove after me, walking the horse by my side as I pressed on in the rain. "Missy! Listen. I'm a poor man with a large family, and that gent is a well-

known fare of mine so I did not like to go against him. But I didn't half like the job. It went against my conscience a bit, it did, seeing you so unwilling inside. After I left you, when I'd got well away, who should I see but the gent dashing round a corner in another hansom, with a bad sort of look on him, and, dashed if I could go on, for thinking of the helpless looking young thing I left with him in the rain. So back I came again, just to see what had become of you. And now, Missy, if I can make up to you by driving you anywhere, say the word and jump in, and there you shall go."

So lost and wretched did I feel, and so consuming was my desire to get home, I could not refuse the offer. The man helped to bring about my misery, but, if I sent him away now, where should I go, what should I do, in this great unknown city? I climbed in, feeling utterly spent.

"Where to?" asked the man, peering down through the now horribly familiar trap-door.

"Oh, take me home, take me home!" I half moaned in answer.

"Yes, Missy, don't you fret, I'll take you home. But where is it?"

"On Wildacre Common."

"Phew! That's a long way off. I can't drive you to Wildacre, but I'll drive you to Waterloo, and you'll get a train there easy that'll take you straight to Wildacre."

He flicked his whip and started. I do not know what streets we passed through, but again I seemed to drive through miles and miles of them. The rain poured down upon the pavements, which shone in murky glossiness beneath the gas-lamps. The people flitted past like black ghosts, beneath the shade of their dripping umbrellas. This was the gay city, the city of my dreams. I had envied

Felix his life in this city; I had risked my life's happiness to spend one day in it. And, behold! its pleasures had turned to ashes in my mouth, and its light into horrible murky darkness. It was a miserable city, a terrible city, a city that made one feel fearfully, utterly alone.

We reached Waterloo at last, and my driver called a porter and asked him to attend to me. Then he drove off instantly, and not until afterwards did I remember that he had gone without even asking for his fare. The porter escorted me to the right platform, but there we found a train to Wildacre had just gone, and there would be no other for thirty-five minutes. I sat down in my wet things upon a bench, and waited with feverish impatience, whilst the clock overhead lagged through the interminable minutes. Then what D'Arcy had said came true. Strange horrible men came up and spoke to me. I sat mute, and answered never a word, and my heart sickened with longing for Felix. The porter came for me when the time was up, and put me into the train, and smiled gratefully at me when I gave him half-a-crown. All through the journey to Wildacre I sat in a kind of stupor, only waking from it when people got in and out at the stations, or when a train whizzed past on its way up to London. Then came the drive up the hill and across the common. It was very cold on the common. The rain had now ceased to fall, and the wind cut my face like a knife, but I was too weary to pull up the cab windows. By the little sunken fence I dismissed the cab, and walked in the darkness across the lawn to the honeysuckle porch. A flood of light greeted me as I opened the door, and Anne Gillotson rushed out of the dining-room looking white and agitated.

"Oh! I *am* glad to see you safely back again,

Miss," she said. "It is going on for ten o'clock, and I have been so anxious about you ever since it became dark. Mr. Felix Gray has been here. He arrived about nine o'clock, but when he found you were out he did not stay."

I stood still in the hall, and a deadly sick feeling came over me. "Did he ask where I was?" I managed to say.

"Yes, Miss. Oh, please don't look like that," replied Anne, almost weeping. "I hope you'll forgive me, but he was so stern and asked such sharp questions I was obliged to tell him."

"You told him——?"

"I told him that you had said you were going to spend the day with an old schoolfellow who was staying near here."

"And then?"

"Oh, dear! Miss, I am more vexed than I can say that it should have happened, for he looked in a dreadful way and went straight out at the door. I begged him to wait, but he said there would be no use in waiting. Then he changed his mind and came in again, and said he'd leave a note for you. I got him pen and paper and he wrote a short note. 'Give her this,' he said, 'when she returns, if she ever does return.' Then he went away. He has not been gone half an hour, Miss, if you'd only been a little bit earlier you'd have caught him. My dear, how wet you are, and how white you look; what does it all mean?"

"Where is the note?" I gasped.

She went into the dining-room and brought it out to me. I tore it open. There were but two words written on the paper:

"Good-bye, Rosamund."

This was the end. Upon me had been laid the punishing hand of God.

CHAPTER V.

NOT Ariadne passioning for Theseus' flight ever felt such grief as mine was then. Felix must have gone back to town in one of the trains that whizzed past mine as I made the dreadful journey home. I had lost my last chance by missing that earlier train at Waterloo. Thirty-five minutes earlier, and we should not have whizzed past each other in silent misery, and I might have been saved. If only I could have seen him! I should have thrown myself upon his bosom, and clung to him and entreated him. I should have poured out to him the whole story of my wickedness and my sorrow, have forced him to believe in my remorse and my love. I would have held him fast and never let him go. And he who loved me so much, seeing my misery, seeing my real love, would have been unable to tear himself away. But now, he had gone, he had said good-bye, and all was over. I staggered where I stood, and the frightened dressmaker came over to me and supported me. There was no strength left in me any more. She led me upstairs, and took off my wet things, and put me to bed like a baby.

Mute and unresisting I let her do as she would with me. Then she fetched the charwoman to light my fire, and they whispered together, and

through my chilled stupor I could feel both were full of deep concern. They brought me some hot drink later on, and I drank it after they had implored me long, drank it just to be left in peace.

All through the night I lay there, cold, quiet, stupid. There had come upon me a frost, a killing frost, and dead were the tender leaves of hope. Sleep fled far away, and left me a watcher of mine own heart's sorrow. My bright day was done. I was for the dark; and no glimpse was given to me, as to Charmian, of the far-off break in the clouds, and the eastern star.

Never once during the miserable Sunday that followed that endless night did I leave the house. I feared lest by some chance Felix might come back and find me again absent. All the day long I watched from the window, straining my eyes across the wide common even after light had waned. Vain effort! No dark figure came towards me, such as I had seen many a time before when waiting eagerly for Felix.

A second night. Again no sleep came near me. I think I was touched with madness that second night. Whenever I closed my eyes I saw the wide dreary common, and far away a dark figure which came on and on, yet never drew nearer. On the Monday, although I knew it would be a fruitless watch, I again set myself to stare out of the window across the common. When the luncheon hour approached Anne came and forcibly drew me away.

"Miss Gwynne," she said, "I really must not allow you to go on like this any longer. You will have a serious illness. Will you not tell me what is wrong? Do, dear child; in some way I might be able to help. When we are in trouble

we never know from what quarter help may come. Tell me, tell me, dear!"

"I have lost Felix," I said, breaking down suddenly into wild sobs. "I have lost Felix. He has said good-bye to me. He will never come back to me again."

"Oh! my dear, I hope it is not so bad as that."

"Hope! There is no hope. I have been guilty of a base and cruel sin, and this is my punishment. God is punishing me: there is no hope when He punishes."

"Oh, my dear! don't say that. I think there is more hope than when man does. Let us try to do something better for you than staring out of that window. Can't we go after Mr. Felix? He's so fond of you I am sure if he could see your poor changed face he'd forgive you anything!"

Could there yet be hope? Oh, Eastern Star! are you there, behind the clouds? My heart beat wildly at the thought.

"Oh, yes! let us do that, let us go at once after Felix," I cried, a fever of impatience rising within me, and taking the place of the cold numbness which had possessed me before.

"Very well," said Anne, "we will go, but not until you have eaten a solid luncheon. I will take no step from here until you have done that."

I saw by her face she was determined, so followed her into the dining-room. So deep a horror did I now feel of the great city, I had not the courage to start off by myself. I forced some solid food down my throat, the barouche was ordered, and in half an hour we were on the weary way to London. It was half past two when we reached Waterloo. Two days ago the place had breathed to me of pleasant anticipation, now it was full of distressing associa-

tions. The bench against the wall wore a terrible look of familiarity, so did the loungers who stared at me on the wide platform. The face of the clock was as the face of an inexorable enemy. "Too late," it had said to me when I was striving to hasten away from London, and then it had lagged through the minutes which lost me Felix. "Too late," it said now to my anxious heart, when I was hastening back. It seemed to me ages before we could get a cab, and again did miles and miles of streets seem to lie twixt me and my goal.

I flew up the stairs when I reached the house where Felix lodged, on and on towards the top where he had often said he lived. The first door I came to I opened. The room within was small and had a deserted look. A fire was dying in the grate, pieces of brown paper and lengths of twine lay about on the floor. One who had inhabited it had been packing there and had gone. Flushing all over with almost unbearable misery I tore at the bell. The landlady had been following me upstairs, and entered now with Anne. A stout woman with a big pale face and dark eyes that looked curiously at me.

"You are too late if you want to see Mr. Gray," she said. "He has just left. He gave up these rooms suddenly and has gone abroad to join a relation; his grandmother, I think he said."

As she spoke her face seemed to me to change, and to become enormously big and white like that of my inexorable enemy the clock. I think I was near swooning at that moment.

"Has he left any address?" asked Anne, divining by instinct the question I had not strength to put myself.

"None whatever. He made up his mind very suddenly; in fact I don't think on Saturday he

had any intention of going abroad at all. I heard nothing of it until Sunday at any rate. All yesterday he was very busy arranging his affairs, and this morning he paid his bill, and a week's rent instead of notice. He took everything away with him and said he should not be returning. Poor gentleman! He looked very ill. There was some trouble I am sure, but he was not one to talk about himself. I'm sorry I can't give you his address, but he gave me no hint of where he was going any more than of why he was going. All I know for certain is that he drove off to catch the club train, 3 P.M. from Victoria. Perhaps if you drove after him at once you might be just in time to say good-bye. You are not far from Victoria Station here."

Strength came back to me at this suggestion. "Come," I cried, seizing hold of Anne's cloak, and almost dragging her out of the room. Almost as excited as I, she rushed after me down the stairs, and a moment later we were tearing along the streets to Victoria. We wasted five precious minutes by going first to an utterly wrong part of the station. I was nearly frantic when I discovered this mistake, and no porter seemed to have time to attend to us. At length a gentleman took pity on our helplessness, and offered us his services.

"The club train, for going abroad—I must catch it," I said feverishly.

"You are on quite a wrong platform. This is the Brighton and South Coast line, you want the London, Chatham, and Dover. I doubt if you'll catch the club train, but we'll see. Follow me—this way."

We followed quickly where he led but it seemed a long way from the one line to the other.

"Ah! Just in time! There's your train!" ex-

claimed our guide when at last we reached the right platform.

Yes, there it was, just a little ahead, to the right. I ran wildly forward, my heart beating almost to suffocation. The others followed me.

"Oh, by Jove! Hard luck, the train's off!" exclaimed the stranger-friend behind me.

My knees trembled beneath me and I came suddenly to a full stop.

"And there he is!" screamed Anne. "Oh, look Miss, in that saloon carriage, bending down. Oh, somebody, stop the train!"

Just for an instant, as the train sped by, I caught sight of Felix. A desolate man in a grey suit sitting by the window with his face buried in his hands. Oh! why did he not look up and see me standing there in helpless misery? Only for an instant was I given this last glimpse of my lover, then I found myself gazing at the back of the departing train.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" cried Anne, wringing her hands. "How unfortunate to miss him again and by so little. You are just too late every time. I never saw such hard luck."

"No," I said, feeling quite numb with despair, "not hard luck. It is the punishing hand, the punishing hand which has kept me back every time. It is no use to struggle against the punishing hand. Take me home, Anne, take me home."

She took me home. Good kind woman, she would not let me succumb to despair. The whole way back she kept telling me that Matthew would be with me that evening, and that he would be surely able to do something, he was so clever. So constantly did she give me this assurance that at length I began to believe in it a little myself. A faint hope crept back into my heart. Matthew might yet save me, Matthew

who was so clever, so ingenious, so full of resource; Matthew who was such an experienced man, who had such a wonderful talent for knowing the right thing to do in a difficulty. If anyone in the world could help me, surely Matthew could. I dwelt upon this thought until it grew and grew in my mind, and became a conviction that Matthew was to save me. How, I knew not, unless by following Felix over the world himself, but somehow he was to save me.

I watched for his coming as a drowning man watches for a spar which the waves are tossing to his side. Two hours after our return from London he came, with his master. The barouche drove up gaily to the door, and the two men got out, both looking radiant. This was the hour to which two days ago I had so looked forward, and now it was all I could do to come forward and greet the home-comers at all, so unbearable was my grief and anxiety.

"Ah! Here she is! Here's the Valkyrie!" cried my uncle, skipping up to me, spotless, fresh, and bland as ever. "My dear, I have much pleasure in shaking hands with you again. It is most pleasant to return to the castle, and to feel I am once more on my own property. Not that I haven't enjoyed my visit immensely. Of course you know that I've been on a pleasant visit, don't you?"

Here he peered sharply and suspiciously into my face. Matthew gave me a nudge. I knew what it meant. I was to ignore the lunatic asylum, and converse with my uncle as if he had simply been away on a visit. The old insupportable life was beginning again; beginning again without Felix.

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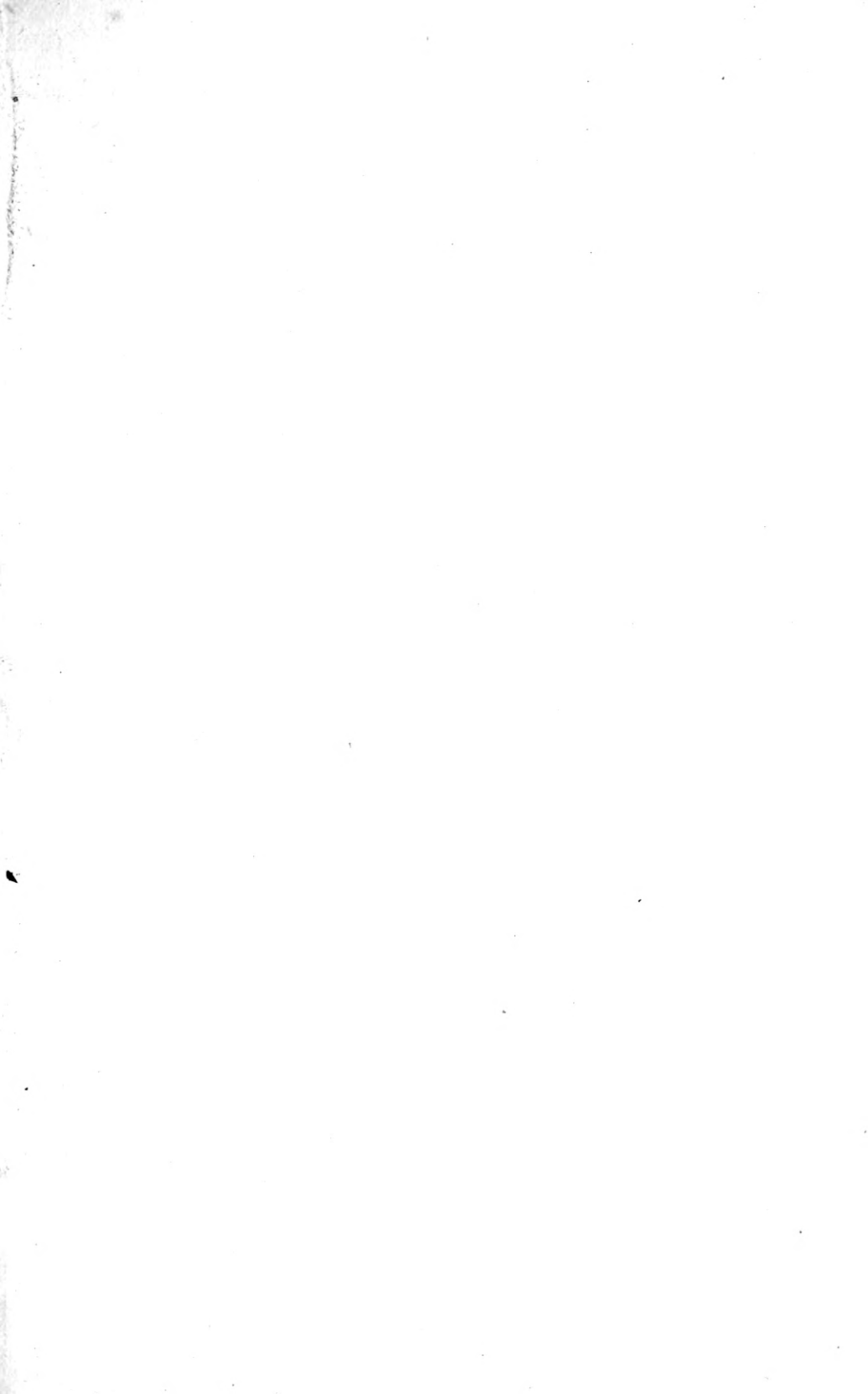
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